The Disgusting in Art

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Abstract

The study of the disgusting in art has for the most part been neglected throughout the history of aesthetics and philosophy of art. This thesis aims to contribute to remedying such a neglect. It develops an extensive examination of the kinds of ways in which the disgusting plays a role in art, with a special focus on its contribution to artistic and aesthetic value. The thesis does this by engaging, more than any other study in aesthetics or philosophy of art to date, with experimental work on the emotion of disgust. It also examines closely artists' actual uses of the disgusting in art. The general approach of the thesis is to examine the peculiarities and similarities of the role of disgust in art, by comparison with the artistic role that other emotions have, especially negative or unpleasant emotions such as fear, anger and sadness. Among other things, the thesis articulates a moderate view of the value of disgusting art. On such a view, disgust is compatible with both artistic and aesthetic value and contributes to both kinds of value, while at the same time being a less artistically and aesthetically apt emotion than others. In particular, the thesis develops an integrationist account of the aesthetic value of disgusting art that appeals to disgust's supporting role for other, more aesthetically apt emotions.

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Acknowledgments

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, my sister and "babbo". I owe them more than I can ever hope to repay.

Besides them, the following are all exceptional people, who were kind to me, and through whose kindness I have learned a great deal about life and how to live it, and about philosophy—and how to do it: my supervisor Peter Lamarque, Chiara Battistella, Marlo Burks, Gennaro Capriati, Mauro Carassai, Angelo Cei, Luciano Floridi, Matthew Kieran, Mauro Megliani, Helen Steward, and Enrico Terrone. Special thanks are also due to Aaron Meskin, who first suggested that I narrow my research focus to the disgusting in art. Responsibility for any and all of my shortcomings remains mine, however.

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Author's Declaration

Some of the material presented within this thesis has previously been published in the following papers:

1. Filippo Contesi. Review of *Savoring Disgust*: The foul and the fair in aesthetics. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 52(1):113–116, 2012.

2. Filippo Contesi. Korsmeyer on Fiction and Disgust. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, forthcoming.

Except where stated, all of the work contained within this thesis represents the original contribution of the author.

Introduction

> There is, significantly, very little notice given to the disgusting in the history of aesthetics from Kant to Jean Clair. This shows that however bloody the history of Europe has been, most particularly in the Twentieth century, we remain very much men and women of the Enlightenment in our philosophies of art. Aesthetics itself has been regarded as part of what Santayana designates as the Genteel Tradition, in which the disgusting, because unmentionable, was unmentioned, and art was taken as logically incapable of giving offense: if it gave offense, it was after all not art.[1]

As Arthur Danto here suggests, the disgusting has been for the most part neglected in the modern history of aesthetics and philosophy of art. In fact, disgust has always been an eccentric and, to some extent, neglected topic in (Western) aesthetics, even before the eighteenth century and modern aesthetics.[2] The historical and sociological reasons for this are certainly complex, but a core set of motivations is perhaps not too difficult to sketch. Disgust is typically unpleasant to experience, and what is disgusting is (insofar as it disgusts) often something that, at least at first, we value negatively. By contrast, art,

[1] Danto [2000]. Cf. also Santayana [1931].

[2] Disgust has in fact been little less neglected in philosophy generally; cf. e.g. Pole [1983], 219. Psychology has not had a dissimilar history, at least until around the 1980s. Cf. Chapter 2 for further discussion.

at least *good* art, is in large part an exemplary case of the positively valuable.[3] Whether the appreciation that is appropriate to them is religious, artistic, cognitive, purely aesthetic, or anything else, good artworks are generally something that we would rather have than not have. After all, artworks are artifacts, and hence crucially involve human creative activity. Why would we bother making art if we did not value it?

On further reflection, of course, things are likely to be more complicated than they appear. For one thing, we might in fact value disgust itself, for instance as a reaction that warns us of something *really* disvaluable. On the other hand, aesthetics is replete with discussions of the role in art of so-called "negative emotions" other than disgust. Danto's intimation, viz. that disgust is especially alien to aesthetics insofar as it is "unmentionable", is perhaps helpful here. Most of us talk about the fearsome, anger-inducing, sad, etc., but we would often rather avoid mentioning the disgusting if we can. Again, I doubt that the reason behind disgust's unmentionability is simply polite or prudish inappropriateness, as Danto's reference to Santayana's "Genteel tradition" instead suggests. Although politeness or etiquette rules might have exacerbated disgust's unmentionability, those rules are more likely *based* on a more ancient and fundamental unmentionability (one that is perhaps also common to some non-Western cultures), rather than being merely a modern or Anglophone creation.

The aim of the present thesis is to overcome such unmentionability and contribute to remedying the neglect of philosophical issues concerning the role of the disgusting in art. Although aestheticians generally may not have devoted

[3] Here, and throughout the thesis, the term 'art' and its cognates stand for all forms of artistic creation or expression, from painting and film, through to literature, music, sculpture etc.

much energy to its study, instances of disgusting art (i.e. of art that disgusts) are far from a rare find, throughout different historical periods, art forms and genres. The phenomenon of disgusting art may in fact be seen as especially widespread or prominent in the contemporary artworld. Jean Clair, art historian and former director of the Musée Picasso in Paris, advances such an idea, and it is a response to his view that motivates Danto's remarks quoted above. "The times of disgust have replaced the age of taste", Clair quips.[4] Whether or not this is true, a superficial survey of the history of art is sufficient to show that it is certainly the case that disgust plays a role in much art, and sometimes a very significant one. Moreover, even where disgust is not a proper part of the intended or appropriate appreciative response to a work of art, its *absence* from that response sometimes still plays an important role, *ex negativo*, in the appreciation of that work. Such is for instance the view that some prominent German-speaking aesthetics theorists took in the eighteenth century, by suggesting that, in many if not all cases, artists must avoid, or at least be extremely careful with, including representations of the disgusting in their works if they want to afford their audiences any aesthetic satisfaction.

Chapter 1 will outline and offer a preliminary discussion of precisely this eighteenth-century view. The chapter will also outline and discuss several other major historical contributions to the philosophy of disgusting art. As well as providing a foundation for the subsequent enquiry, the chapter will show the (limited) extent of the engagement of previous philosophical reflection on the topic. As will be clear, the eighteenth-century view mentioned is one of only two major philosophical discussions of disgust in art. The other is contempo-

[4] Jean Clair [2004]; as cit. in Tedeschini [2013], 200. Cf. also Clair [2000].

rary, and was accomplished in great part by Carolyn Korsmeyer's recent work. In addition to correcting misunderstandings of particular philosophical views, the chapter also argues that the abovementioned German-speaking eighteenth-century outlook, often taken to be the received view on disgusting art, is in fact less of a widespread position in the history of aesthetics (and even within the eighteenth century itself), than is often assumed.

In Chapter 2, disgust is studied as a psychological phenomenon. As throughout the thesis, my focus will be on what is variously called "physical", "bodily", or "visceral" disgust. This is in opposition to so-called "moral" or "socio-moral" disgust, as well as to a host of other possible psychological constructs that appeal to or involve physical disgust (e.g. sexual disgust, or political disgust, or even aesthetic disgust, in the sense of an attribution of very negative aesthetic value). The chapter outlines the main features of the disgust response. Among these, I single out six that have a special relevance to the art case and will, as such, be called upon to play a role in subsequent chapters. These are: the universality of the disgust system in humans, the role of cultural learning in disgust acquisition, disgust's ideational character, its contamination sensitivity, its object-centricity, and disgust's unconsciousness of purpose.

Since a lot of art involves representations, Chapter 3 goes on to analyse the case of disgustingness and disgust elicitation by means of representations. A good part of the chapter deals with the issue of the so-called "transparency" of representation with respect to disgust. This issue was originally raised by the aforementioned group of German-speaking eighteenth-century theorists. Much more recently, Korsmeyer has revisited it and connected it to a more popular, contemporary issue, viz. the paradox of fiction. I unpack the different claims and arguments present in both the transparency and the paradox of fiction

issues, and offer my own understanding of them. Among other things, I argue that Korsmeyer is mistaken to take disgust to be in an in-kind peculiar relationship with respect to the paradox of fiction. I also argue against the transparency thesis, although I suggest that disgust is often elicited by representations much more easily and certainly than is the case with many other emotions. I offer an account of this peculiarity of disgust in terms of disgust's object-centricity.

Chapter 4 looks at instances of art that disgusts or involves the disgusting, and aims to offer a useful, albeit not definitive, categorization of kinds of disgusting art. Here, as throughout the thesis, examples and case studies will be chosen in the most charitable and neutral way possible. In particular, this means that I have aimed as much as possible to discuss instances of disgusting art that satisfy the least controversial standards of both artistic/aesthetic quality and disgustingness. Besides providing an overview of various artworks that deal with the disgusting, the chapter also discusses several ways in which features of an artwork beyond its subject (e.g. its style, or its material composition) can modulate its disgustingness.

Building on this overview of disgusting art, as well as on the material presented in the first three chapters, Chapters 5 and 6 conclude the thesis by addressing the obstacles and rewards that disgust can pose and afford in art. I do so by investigating the role of disgust in the so-called "paradox of negative emotions"—or, in a more felicitous formulation, in the paradox of *negatively valuable art*. As elsewhere in the thesis, here my method involves using other unpleasant or negative emotions (including fear, anger, sadness, and pity) as a comparison class for the disgust case. Given the paucity of explicit and informed discussions of the case of disgust in the aesthetics literature, Chapter

5 surveys a number of existing solutions of the paradox of negatively valuable art, the vast majority of which were not explicitly or primarily formulated with disgust in mind. One exception in this regard, at least *prima facie*, is Noël Carroll's account of the appeal of horror fictions. However, I will argue that his understanding of disgust in that account is importantly flawed. I will also argue for an alternative understanding of the relationship between disgust and horror. The chapter will point out the major strengths and weaknesses of each one of the accounts surveyed, both in general as well as, where appropriate, with respect to disgust specifically.

Finally, Chapter 6 will discuss in depth the two major views of the appeal of disgusting art proposed in past literature: the received eighteenth-century view and Korsmeyer's recent account in terms of meanings of human mortality. Here, too, I will point out strengths and weaknesses of the views discussed. Among other things, I will argue for a pluralistic approach to the paradox of negatively valuable art, while at the same time offering what I take to be the most promising account of the aesthetic value of much of the best disgusting art. This account is an integrationist account and appeals to disgust's supporting role for other, often more aesthetically apt emotions.

So I conclude the thesis by suggesting that disgust is significantly less artistically and aesthetically apt than other negative emotions. In an important sense, in fact, the main aim of the present thesis is to articulate a more moderate view of the value of disgusting art than is suggested by either Korsmeyer's or the received eighteenth-century view. Both perspectives on disgusting art are too radical, and each one errs on opposite sides: Korsmeyer's on the side of optimism and the eighteenth-century view on the side of pessimism. Disgusting art is compatible with both artistic and aesthetic value, and disgust

does contribute to both kinds of value. At the same time, disgust is a less artistically apt emotion than others. Nonetheless, the study of the disgusting in art is important.

The first reason for this is that disgust and the disgusting are components of a significant subset of artworks, both in terms of sheer numbers and of value. In fact, the significance of disgust's presence in the world of art is much greater than the attention that the philosophy of art has so far devoted to it. Secondly, disgust as an emotion is a widespread presence in human life. An important feature of art and aesthetic experience is that they are ways for humans to engage with the multifaceted nature of their own lives. Art cannot and has not ignored disgust; the philosophy of art should not either. Thirdly, now, more than ever before, a study of the disgusting in art can benefit from the understanding of the emotion of disgust that a significant body of experimental research has accumulated over the past two or three decades. The present thesis engages with such experimental work more than any other study in aesthetics or philosophy of art to date. Fourthly, and finally, there is interest in the study of the disgusting in art precisely insofar as it is a limit, or a challenging case of artistic or aesthetic appreciation (not differently from the way it was understood by some in the eighteenth century, in fact, and in particular by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing [1766/1962]). In this respect, my conclusion that disgust is a relatively unapt emotion artistically confirms the interest of such a study. Far from being simply negative, in fact, my conclusion also emphasizes the significance of the achievement of disgusting art that overcomes the low artistic potential of the emotion and manages to be artistically, or even aesthetically valuable.

1. The Philosophy of Disgusting Art

1. The role that disgust and the disgusting play in art has been generally more neglected by philosophy of art and aesthetics than the role of other affects, such as love, fear, and terror. However, philosophical reflection on the issue, albeit rather sketchily, has always been present. This chapter aims to provide an outline of the history of this philosophical reflection. The usefulness of such an outline is twofold. On the one hand, it shows the historical foundations on which contemporary investigations can build. On the other, and relatedly, it introduces the reader to key themes which will run throughout the entire thesis. As far as this historical outline is concerned, finally, one thread which I am especially concerned with developing is the reasoned pessimism that has been consistently expressed about the value of disgusting art. I will show the main ways in which such pessimism was motivated in the various cases, as well as the exceptions that were made and the reasons advanced for them. The dialectic between pessimism and optimism about disgusting art will run throughout the thesis.

2. A very early comment on the appearance or aesthetics of the disgusting can be found in Plato's discussion, in Book IV of *The Republic*, of the story of Leontius. In order to demonstrate the existence of a third part of the soul, *spirit*, in addition to the rational and appetitive parts, Plato has Socrates cite as fact the following story. Leontius is a man who encounters some dead

bodies from a recent public execution. The sight of the dead bodies awakens the appetitive part of his soul:

> He felt a desire to see them, and also a dread and abhorrence of them; for a time he struggled and covered his eyes, but at length the desire got the better of him; and forcing them open, he ran up to the dead bodies, saying, Look, ye wretches, take your fill of the fair sight.[1]

In Plato's story, Leontius's desire is contrasted with the spirited part of his soul, and desire wins. That is how Socrates interprets it, when he adds:

> The moral of the tale is, that anger at times goes to war with desire, as though they were two distinct things.[2]

In Leontius's story, then, the sight of what is disgusting—dead bodies—has a very powerful appeal indeed. This fits in with Plato's view of the unruly and dangerous role that our appetites and emotions have in a balanced soul. Reason has to control and guide the influence that the appetitive and spirited parts of our soul have on the way we lead our lives. In fact, one can see how Plato's attitude towards disgust in the Leontius passage, in the context of his general negative attitude towards representational art, leads Carolyn Korsmeyer [2011] to speculate that the passage "effectively removes disgust from among the emotions that can be aroused by mimesis to achieve positive aesthetic ends".[3]

However, Korsmeyer's conclusion about disgust and *mimesis* is unjus-

[1] Plato [360BCE/2009], Book IV, 439e–440a.
[2] Plato [360BCE/2009], Book IV, 440a.
[3] Korsmeyer [2011], 42.

tified. Leontius's story is about the appearance of the disgusting in real life, not in an imitation. Furthermore, the story is far from unambiguously denying the aesthetic appeal of the disgusting. In fact, some commentators, Matthew Kieran [1997] for instance, suggest that Leontius's "delighting in the corpses, analogous to punk's delight in complete ugliness or incoherence in both style and music, suggest that it is the grotesque features which are themselves delighted in."[4]

However difficult its interpretation, at least two things in the story are straightforward. One is that Leontius feels a repulsion of sorts towards the sight of something disgusting. The other is that he is *attracted* to that sight. The natures of his attraction and of his repulsion are not however as obvious. For one thing, Leontius's repulsion might be viewed as just a reaction of (physical) disgust at the putrefying bodies. However, Plato's characterization of it seems to have stronger connotations than a reaction of physical disgust would justify. He speaks of "dread and abhorrence". He also attributes such a reaction to the spirited part of Leontius's soul and calls it "anger" (*οργήν*). In other words, the repulsion Plato has in mind appears to be morally charged—a sort of moral disgust.

Moreover, the moral disgust felt by Leontius is not negatively viewed by Plato. In fact, it actually pushes Leontius towards the right course of action. Refraining from the sight of the corpses is what Leontius's spirit speaks in favour of, insofar as the former is a disgusting sight; and reason supports spirit against Leontius's desire to see those corpses. In other words, the "dread and abhorrence" caused by the sight of those corpses is seen by Plato

[4] Kieran [1997], 394.

as a manifestation of the spirited part of Leontius's soul. It is therefore wrong to conclude with Korsmeyer [2011] that Plato's attitude here is a particular instance of his general mistrust of art's influence and emotional power.[5] Whilst in Books 3 and 10 of the *Republic*, Plato does express serious moral and epistemic reservations about art's emotional power, Leontius's story is actually an instance of an emotion playing a positive moral role.

The nature of Leontius's attraction is not clear either. Kieran [2009] suggests it is driven by curiosity.[6] A problem with this suggestion is that it is difficult to see what could be morally wrong with one's curiosity. Alternatively, the nature of the attraction might be sexual. A Plato scholar persuasively remarks that:

> Leontius' desire to look at the corpses is sexual in nature, for a fragment of contemporary comedy tells us that Leontius was known for his love of boys as pale as corpses.[7]

If Leontius's desire is indeed sexual, then his repulsion might actually be something like moral disgust. A plausible target of such moral disgust would be necrophilia. On the sexual desire hypothesis, however, disgust does not necessarily play a central role. If the attraction is indeed necrophiliac, then the disgusting features might indeed be important in establishing the attraction. But Leontius's attraction might instead be a case of overcoming or bracketing of disgust facilitated by sexual desire.[8] In this case, the disgusting

[5] Plato's story "effectively removes disgust from among the emotions that can be aroused by mimesis to achieve positive aesthetic ends, though this is no surprise given Plato's general mistrust of emotions altogether" (Korsmeyer [2011], 42).

[6] Kieran [2009], 257.

[7] C.D.C. Reeve, in Plato [360BCE/1992], 115; as cited in Korsmeyer [2011], 42n.

[8] Sexual desire does facilitate the bracketing of disgust in some circumstances; for more on this see Chapters 2, 4 and 5.

features would not be the object of Leontius's attraction. Finally, and even if Leontius is attracted to the corpses' disgusting features, his attraction, although in a sense aesthetic, is sustained by motives that the mainstream tradition in aesthetics would consider incompatible with, or at the very least insufficient for, an attribution of positive artistic (or even aesthetic) value.

3. A much more straightforward instance of an early interest in the aesthetics of the disgusting is to be found in a passage of Aristotle's *Poetics*. While discussing the reasons behind the birth of poetry, he points out that:

> Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.'[9]

Unlike Plato, Aristotle is here straightforwardly addressing the case of representation. He also explicitly offers a reason for the aesthetic appeal of the disgusting: the cognitive pleasure of imitation. According to Aristotle, learning about the shape and features of things is pleasurable, even if those things are painful to watch in real life. Aristotle's cognitive explanation has since been very influential in informing many different accounts proposed in solution to the general puzzle of negative emotions/value in art, up until

[9] Aristotle [350BCE/1996], 1448b.

contemporary times.[10]

Let us look more closely at Aristotle's proposal. First of all, Aristotle does not explicitly talk of disgust or of the disgusting. He refers to "the forms of the most ignoble animals ($\vartheta\eta\rho\acute{\iota}\omega\nu$) and of dead bodies" as an instance of the phenomenon to explain. In fact, in his discussion of Aristotle's passage, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing [1766/1962] remarks that "it would seem that he [Aristotle] had no intention of including bodily ugliness in those displeasing objects which can afford pleasure in imitation".[11] Lessing interprets Aristotle's examples as not involving bodily ugliness (or, in other translations, "ugliness of form") in any relevant way.[12] As to Aristotle's "most ignoble animals", Lessing translates them as "ferocious" beasts (or "wild beasts"). He says that these may or may not be ugly, but it is their being terrible which makes them pleasing in imitation. With reference to corpses, Lessing says that "it is the keener feeling of pity, the terrifying thought of our own destruction, that makes a real corpse repulsive to us".[13] This repulsion can leave way to pleasure as it is much attenuated in imitation by the absence/fictionality of its object. Bodily ugliness, instead, as well as disgustingness, cannot for Lessing be similarly attenuated as neither depends on the presence/non-fictionality of its object.

Holding this interpretation of Aristotle's examples is important to Lessing in order to align his views to those of the great Stagirite. In fact, as will be clearer later on in this chapter, Lessing is committed to the view

[10] For a contemporary cognitive solution see for instance Noël Carroll [1990], chap. 4; see Chapter 5 for a discussion of cognitive solutions.

[11] Lessing [1766/1962], 127.

[12] In the *Laocoön*, Lessing uses 'bodily ugliness', 'ugliness of form', 'physical ugliness' and 'deformity' almost interchangeably and he even remarks at one point that: "The sensation which accompanies the sight of physical deformity is disgust, though a low degree of it." (Lessing [1766/1962], 159).

[13] Lessing [1766/1962], 127.

that both disgust and physical ugliness are incapable of being made pleasurable by artistic imitation (except in a limited number of cases). However, our aversion to the sight of corpses is for a big part a more visceral reaction of disgust to putrefying flesh and vermin than any pity for dead people or thoughts about our deaths.[14] About Aristotle's "most ignoble animals", things are instead slightly more complicated. Lessing translates the Greek *θηρίων* with 'wild beasts', whereas most contemporary translations, perhaps for contextual reasons, opt for 'most ignoble animals', 'lowest animals', 'obscene beasts', etc. But the issue is not of much importance in the present context, given that Aristotle explicitly uses the example of (disgusting) corpses. It will be safest to assume that in the passage at issue Aristotle has in mind a variety of (normally) unpleasant emotional reactions, *including* disgust but also emotions such as fear or terror (emotions which "ferocious beasts" are more likely to cause).

So Aristotle talks of the pleasure that arises from the imitation of things that are found disgusting and unpleasant in real life. As clear as his proposal may be, though, it is not explicit on the following two issues. Firstly, what changes in the passage from reality to representation in terms of the unpleasantness caused to an audience? Is the pain that one feels in the real-life case completely offset when the disgusting thing is only represented? Or is it only diminished? Secondly, and relatedly, what changes from reality to representation in terms of pleasure? Is the cognitive pleasure of recognition only felt when things are represented? These questions are important, such that, if unanswered, they would leave Aristotle's proposal incomplete as an

[14] I will address this issue more thoroughly in Chapter 2, in arguing for what I will call disgust's 'unconsciousness of purpose'.

account of the aesthetic appeal of the disgusting.

Regrettably, Aristotle's text does not provide conclusive evidence for any answers. He only claims that "[o]bjects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced" and that, "[t]he cause of this [...] is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure". However, there is one answer to the questions above that looks to be the most plausible. Of course one can learn about forms and features of things both if one looks at them in reality or in a representation. But it is plausible to think that one can experience the subtle pleasure of learning about forms and features of things, only if looking at such things does not cause too much displeasure to one. It is also plausible to think that one kind of circumstance when such things are not too unpleasant is when they are experienced in a representation rather than in real life.

4. After Aristotle, the issue of the aesthetic significance of negative emotions becomes less of a concern for philosophers,[15] as does aesthetics more generally. The issue is picked up again when, in the eighteenth century, aesthetics acquires a prominent status within philosophy as a sub-discipline worthy of being pursued for its own sake. At the same time, the world of art is looking at the Greco-Roman classics as its aesthetic model. Neo-Classicism, as championed by people like Johann Joachim Winckelmann, is the movement that dominates art criticism.[16] It is no coincidence that aesthetic reflection, too, looks at the Greco-Roman world for inspiration and Aristotle's *Poetics*

[15] One notable exception is the Pseudo-Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime*, written in the first centuries of the Christian era. Cf. discussion of Lessing's views on the disgusting in literature later on in this chapter.

[16] Cf. Winckelmann [2006].

is one of the model texts of the newly named discipline of aesthetics.[17] In the context of this interest for the Classical world of art and aesthetic reflection, and for the aesthetic significance of unpleasant emotions, the emotion of disgust acquires a specific role and relevance that it had never had before.

I have already suggested that Lessing (misleadingly) appeals to Aristotle in defending the claim that, in many cases, artistic imitation cannot turn what is disgusting or physically ugly into something pleasurable. Lessing devotes two full sections of his *Laocoön* (Chapters XXIV and XXV) to the disgusting and physically ugly in "poetry" (or literature more generally) and painting. His view is somewhat different in the two cases of painting and poetry. In painting, artists have to beware of the disgusting and aim to avoid representing it. Indeed, according to Lessing, even indirect representations of the disgusting can, as it were, ruin a painting. He says:

> Even if it were an indisputable fact that there is, properly speaking, no such thing as an object disgusting to the sight—which painting as a fine art would naturally renounce—disgusting objects would still have to be avoided because the association of ideas renders them disgusting to the sight also. In a painting of the burial of Christ, Pordenone pictures one of the bystanders holding his nose. Richardson objects to this on the ground that Christ has not been dead long enough for his body to have begun to putrify. But in the case of the resurrection of Lazarus he believes that the

[17] 'Aesthetica' is a term first used by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1735 (in his Master's thesis) and then again in 1750 as the title of his treatise in two volumes dedicated to the "science of sensible knowledge" (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*). Cf. Guyer [2014] (accessed on 3/9/2014). In accordance with typical eighteenth- and nineteenth-century jargon, in the remainder of this chapter I will use 'aesthetic' and its cognate expressions to refer to artistic phenomena as well (e.g. value).

> painter might be allowed to depict some of the bystanders in such an attitude, because the story expressly states that his body had already begun to smell. To my mind this representation would be unthinkable here, too, for not only does actual stench, but even the very idea of it, awaken a feeling of disgust. We avoid places that stink, even when we have a cold.[18]

This passage from Lessing is very interesting as it combines many different ideas. Firstly, it refers to a distinction between what is disgusting to the eye and what disgusts the sight only by association. Here Lessing refers back to something he says in section XXIV where he disagrees with Moses Mendelssohn about the senses that are proper to disgust. Mendelssohn's view, in his "82nd Letter Regarding Literature" is that, "properly speaking, the sense of sight has no objects of disgust".[19] Properly speaking, disgust is an unpleasant feeling that is only experienced directly by the "lower senses" of taste, smell and touch. Such an unpleasant feeling derives, in the case of the first two senses "from excessive sweetness", and in the case of touch "from an all-too intense tenderness of bodies that do not sufficiently resist the touching fibres".[20] Objects which can cause us such unpleasantness are unpleasant to the eye only indirectly, in virtue of the association between their visual appearance—which is not in itself unpleasant—and the gustatory, olfactory or tactile unpleasantness they are capable of causing. Lessing objects to Mendelssohn's view by bringing the example of things that are disgusting only in virtue of their visual appearance:

[18] Lessing [1766/1962], 137.
[19] Mendelssohn [1760]; lacking an English edition, here and in what follows quotations from Mendelssohn's "82nd Letter" are as cited in Menninghaus [2003].
[20] Mendelssohn [1760].

> A mole on the face, a harelip, a flat nose with prominent nostrils, a complete lack of eyebrows are cases of ugliness repugnant to neither our sense of smell nor taste nor touch. Still, it is certain that we feel something much more closely akin to disgust than that which other bodily deformities, such as a clubfoot or a high shoulder, awaken in us.[21]

Lessing continues by adding the following speculation. The reason why disgust may appear an experience exclusive to taste, smell or touch is, he says, that the eye receives so many contemporaneous visual impressions that the experience of unpleasantness caused by a mole on the face will be so much more fleeting than the totalizing experience of a disgusting taste, smell or touch ("taste, smell, and touch, our lower senses, cannot perceive [other, more pleasant] realities when they are being affected by something repugnant").[22]

Thus, Lessing and Mendelssohn have somewhat different views on the issue of the "proper" senses of disgust.[23] Although Lessing and Mendelssohn have different views on this issue, they are led to similarly sceptical conclusions about a positive role of disgust in art. From the primary link between disgust and the senses of taste, smell and touch, Mendelssohn concludes that the disgusting should not be a subject for the fine arts. It is the higher senses of sight and hearing that matter to art and they can only by association be

[21] Lessing [1766/1962], 131.
[22] Lessing [1766/1962], 131.
[23] A connection between disgust and one (or more) particular senses instead of others has been advocated by many. Taste has usually, but not always, been indicated as the primary sense of disgust. For instance, Johann Gottfried Herder, in direct response to Lessing's and Mendelssohn's remarks, argues that "disgust properly pertains only to taste and to smell as a sense allied with taste" (Herder [1769/2006]). Cf. also Chapter 3 for a critical discussion of the "senses of disgust".

affected by disgust:

> by its very nature, the sensation of disgust can be experienced exclusively by the darkest of all the senses, such as taste, smell, and touch—and these senses do not have the slightest role in the fine arts. Artistic imitation labors solely for the more lucid senses, namely sight and hearing.[24]

Mendelssohn's assumption that only sight and hearing are worthy of attention in the fine arts is a traditional *topos*. It seems to be motivated by two main considerations. One is simply that the category of the fine arts in Mendelssohn's times was mainly constituted by poetry, painting, sculpture and music (and sometimes architecture). Appreciation of these arts involves almost exclusively the senses of sight and hearing. Another consideration in support of the neglect of the "darkest" senses was the widespread opinion that they were, in a way, less *cognitive* senses. Because of both their (supposed) power of discrimination and their capacity to perceive things at further distances, sight and hearing were considered as more efficient cognitive tools than taste, smell or even, albeit more controversially, touch.

Nonetheless, although he disagrees with Mendelssohn on the exclusivity of disgust to the lower senses, Lessing admits that, even if sight were not a proper sense of disgust, visual depictions of the disgusting would still be a bad-making feature of a work of art. This is in virtue of the fact that, as the passage quoted above says, even "the very idea" of a disgusting smell is disgusting. So the image of someone holding his nose at a foul smell is disgusting and will thus make for a bad painting. In fact, this is something

[24] Mendelssohn [1760].

that Lessing takes from Mendelssohn. Towards the end of the passage quoted by Lessing where Mendelssohn indicates taste, smell and touch as the only proper senses of disgust, Mendelssohn says:

> These [disgusting] objects, then, can also become unbearable to the sense of sight through a simple association of concepts, in that we remember the displeasure they prompt for taste, smell or touch. But, properly speaking, the sense of sight has no objects of disgust. In the end, when lively enough, the mere idea of disgusting objects can, in itself and for itself, prompt revulsion—and indeed, notably, without the soul needing to imagine the objects as real.[25]

So, whether or not one thinks that disgust is especially associated with the lower senses, the fine arts have to avoid the disgusting because the "mere idea" of something disgusting is already disgusting.

Thus, Lessing and Mendelssohn agree that the "mere idea" of something disgusting is enough to excite disgust. But what does that actually amount to? What they say resonates with the view of disgust put forward in contemporary studies in the psychology of disgust. According to the founder of the experimental psychology of disgust, Paul Rozin, and his colleagues, disgust must be distinguished from distaste. Whereas distaste is "a type of rejection primarily motivated by sensory factors", disgust is "primarily motivated by ideational factors: the nature or origin of the item or its social history".[26] Without going into too much detail here,[27] Rozin and colleagues argue that it is primarily what an object is that makes it disgusting, rather than any

[25] Mendelssohn [1760]. Cf. also Carolyn Korsmeyer [1999], chaps. 1–2.
[26] Rozin and Fallon [1987], 24.
[27] I will discuss the issue thoroughly in Chapter 2.

(unpleasant) sensory properties it may actually have. Only once an object is recognized (or imagined) as disgusting, though, will it become unpleasant. To put it otherwise, it is the idea of something disgusting that primarily elicits disgust. Is this view of disgust what Lessing and Mendelssohn have in mind in their talk of "mere idea"?

A careful look at the textual evidence suggests that they have something different in mind. As mentioned, Mendelssohn is committed to the idea that, properly speaking, only some senses (i.e., taste, smell and touch) experience disgust. To specify this claim, he points to the particular sensory experiences of disgust that are proper to each of those senses ("excessive sweetness" for taste and smell and "all-too intense tenderness" for touch). Instead, sight and hearing can experience disgust only by association. Again, such an association works by referring back to the sensory experiences proper to the lower senses ("we remember the displeasure they prompt for taste, smell, or touch"). It is clear that someone who holds such a view of disgust cannot agree with what Rozin and colleagues suggest about the ideational nature of the motivation behind disgust and must instead subscribe to a sensory view.

Although it may suggest a different view of disgust from Mendelssohn's, what Lessing says is not in line with an ideational view of disgust either. To prove his point that the "very idea" of something disgusting is already disgusting, in fact, Lessing points out that "[w]e shun bad-smelling places even when we have a cold in the head". He may seem to say here that we avoid the place because we know it to be foul, whether or not we can tell by smelling it. But that is not what he has in mind. In the line preceding the sentence just quoted he says in fact that, "not only the actual smell, but

the very idea of *it* [i.e., of the smell] is nauseous". So it is the very idea of "the actual smell" that is nauseous, and not the idea of the foul place. Thus, both Lessing and Mendelssohn would appear to subscribe (at least in some cases) to a (version of a) sensory view of disgust elicitation. On such a view, it is sensory features (e.g. a particular smell) that primarily elicit disgust (insofar as *they* are the intentional object of the disgust), although the idea of those features is sufficient to disgust.

The issue of the "mere idea" of the disgusting requires further attention; it is in fact even more important to the motivations behind both Lessing's and Mendelssohn's distrust of the disgusting in art, than it may have appeared so far. The foregoing discussion has been structured around Lessing's claim that (even) representations of something that calls to mind what is disgusting are to be avoided in painting. But that is only part of the story because, for Lessing, directly representing something disgusting is equally something that the fine art of painting should avoid. The reason for this he takes again from Mendelssohn. He quotes a passage from Mendelssohn that says:

> Representations of fear, sadness, horror, pity and so forth can only prompt displeasure in so far as we take the evil for reality. Hence they can dissolve into pleasurable sensations with the recognition that they are an artful deception. Due to the law of imagination, the repellent sensation of disgust, however, emerges from an idea in the soul alone, whether or not the [causative] object be held for real. What help, then, could it be for the injured mind when the art of imitation betrays itself, be it even in the most flagrant way? Its displeasure did not result from the assumption that the evil is real, but from the latter's mere idea, and this is really present. The

> sensations of disgust thus are always nature, never imitation.[28]

This passage of course reiterates the same point that Mendelssohn makes elsewhere in the "82nd Letter Regarding Literature", in a passage I quoted earlier:

> In the end, when lively enough, the mere idea of disgusting objects can, in itself and for itself, prompt revulsion—and indeed, notably, without the soul needing to imagine the objects as real.[29]

This appeal to the "mere idea" of the disgusting proves therefore to have multifarious consequences. We have seen already that the mere idea of a disgusting thing is enough to render disgusting (and thus unpleasant) any representation that calls to mind that thing. Now Mendelssohn—and Lessing after him, although with further caveats—tells us, the mere idea of something disgusting makes a representation of that thing as disgusting and unpleasant as the real thing: "the repellent sensation of disgust, however, emerges from an idea in the soul alone, whether or not the object be held for real". Unlike what happens with other negative emotions, the eighteenth-century claim goes, the recognition that it is only a representation will not do the trick of attenuating the unpleasantness, at least not so much that an image or description of something disgusting can—for instance in virtue of the pleasure inherent in imitation—be turned from unpleasant into pleasurable.

To recapitulate, appeal to the "mere idea" of the disgusting is made in three (related) contexts. First, on the assumption that disgust is, properly speaking, only experienced through taste, smell or touch, a visual

[28] Mendelssohn [1760].
[29] Mendelssohn [1760].

representation of something disgusting will still be disgusting because the "mere idea" of something disgusting is disgusting. This view is held by Mendelssohn. Secondly, Lessing does not share Mendelssohn's assumption concerning the proper senses of disgust; however, he still claims that, if one grants Mendelssohn's assumption, then even a disgusting representation of something that merely calls to mind something disgusting—such as that of someone holding his nose—will be disgusting. The mere idea of something disgusting is enough to excite disgust. Lastly, the notion of "mere idea" is invoked to directly support the claim that nature and representation are indistinguishable with respect to disgust. Disgust is indifferent to the nature/representation distinction; something disgusting in real life will excite disgust in the same way, and (almost) to the same extent as a representation of it. This view is put forward by Mendelssohn with respect to the fine arts in general, whereas Lessing seems to agree with it only insofar as painting is concerned.[30] In all three contexts, the "evil" that disgust represents would seem to be understood as primarily residing in the sensory features of the elicitor, rather than on what thing it is.

5. As a further attempt to clarify the notion of a "mere idea", it is worth considering what is likely to be its source or precedent.[31] A contemporary of Lessing and Mendelssohn, belonging to their cultural milieu but writing slightly earlier than them, had similar views. In 1745, Johann Elias Schlegel writes:

[30] Cf. later on in this chapter.

[31] Menninghaus [2003] convincingly makes the case for the influence of Johann Elias, and his brother Johann Adolf Schlegel [1751/9], on Mendelssohn's views on disgusting art (and hence on wider German-speaking eighteenth-century thought).

> There are also emotions in regard to which we are by no means so certain that a mental concept is weaker than a mental impression of the same object. The mental image sometimes permits us to analyze carefully an object from which we would turn our eyes if we saw it in reality. Disgust seems to me to be an example of this. It is a sensation aroused far more by describing a disgusting object in detail than by looking at it. And I confess that I would rather see an ugly old woman than read a detailed description of her. Hence, if we are to avoid this error and deserve the thanks of those for whom we imitate when we awaken unpleasant rather than pleasant sensations in them, we must consider how strong an impression each kind of imitation makes, both in regard to the impression of similarity and to the other sensations it awakens, and see to it that the impression of similarity is stronger than the others.[32]

Schlegel's above is a further use of the notion of a "mere idea". Although Schlegel does not use this exact expression, his "mental concept"/"mental image" are quite clearly its equivalents. To be sure, Schlegel goes somewhat further than both Mendelssohn or Lessing. For him, not only is disgust at real-life and representational counterparts indistinguishable, but the latter can be even more intensely unpleasant than the former (at least if the latter is caused by seeing and the former by a written text). However, all three authors agree on the claim that a central source of (the unpleasantness of) disgust is the mere idea, or mental concept/image, of the disgusting (be this

[32] Schlegel [1745/1965], 45.

either sensory features or objects).

To conclude the discussion on the notion of "mere idea", I will notice what looks to me a problematic point in Mendelssohn's view. It concerns the compatibility between the indistinguishability claim and the sensory view of disgust that he appears to hold. The question is: if we find certain things disgusting in virtue of the sensory experience that we have of them, then why is it that this sensory experience is as unpleasant as—rather than more unpleasant than—the experience afforded by a non-sensory representation of them (e.g. a literary description), or by a representation of them that appeals to other senses from those that motivate disgust? If, for example, we find worms disgusting in virtue of the particular tactile sensations that we have of them, then how can a literary description or a painting of a worm excite disgust to the same degree as our tactile experience? The idea of a sensory feature or experience is generally weaker than the direct experience itself. Why this should be different in the case of disgust is puzzling.

However, this criticism does not affect Lessing's more sophisticated view. Although Lessing, as I have argued, implicitly subscribes to a sensory view of disgust elicitation (at least in some cases), he also accepts that sight is one of the 'senses of disgust'. So, if, for instance, one thinks with Lessing that a mole on the face is, properly speaking, disgusting for the sense of sight, then it would be less puzzling for one to also say that a visual experience of that mole in real life excites as much disgust as a visual experience of the same thing in painting. Moreover, Lessing does accept that disgustingness is attenuated in literature, where the only direct source of disgust are ideas

or concepts.[33]

6. The impossibility of attenuating or cancelling the unpleasantness of disgust through imitation is not the only reason behind German-speaking eighteenth-century pessimism about disgust's artistic potential. According to Lessing and Mendelssohn, among others, there is an additional reason. Lessing puts it forward by way of a quotation from a contemporary German philologist, Christian Klotz, who in his *Epistolae Homericae*, says:

> Other unpleasant passions [...] may, even in nature, and setting aside imitation, frequently please our senses by never exciting pure dislike but always mixing their bitterness with pleasure. Our fear is seldom devoid of all hope. Terror rouses all our powers to escape danger, wrath is linked with the desire for revenge, sorrow with the pleasing recollection of past happiness, and compassion is inseparably bound up with the tender feelings of love and devotion. The soul has the liberty of dwelling now on the pleasing, now on the disagreeable part of a passion, and of creating for itself a mixture of pleasure and displeasure which is more enticing than the purest enjoyment. It requires but little self-observation to find this true numberless times. How else could we explain that to the angry man his anger, to the grieving man his grief, are dearer than all the cheerful ways by which we try to soothe him? But it is a very different matter with disgust and its related sensations. The soul does not recognize any perceptible admixture of pleasure in them.

[33] Cf. also below in this chapter, and Chapter 3 for further discussion of disgust elicitation and representation.

> Displeasure gains the upper hand and there is hence no situation, either in nature or in imitation, in which the mind would not recoil in disgust from representations of them.[34]

Here disgust is again portrayed as having a different nature from other unpleasant emotions which commonly please in artistic representations. According to Klotz—and Lessing with him—the experience of other negative emotions such as fear or sadness is, already in real life, not completely unpleasant. In the affective experiences of these other negative emotions, some pleasure always accompanies the pain. Mendelssohn agrees with Klotz and Lessing. He says:

> The soul's unpleasant passions [fear etc.] have yet a third advantage over disgust [...] in that they often flatter the soul even outside the realm of imitation, in nature itself. Their advantage is that they never prompt pure displeasure, rather always mixing their bitterness with delight. [...] The situation is very different, however, in the case of disgust and related sensations. Here the soul does not recognize any perceptible admixture of pleasure.[35]

For people like Lessing and Mendelssohn, the (alleged) complete absence of pleasure from the experience of disgust is a powerful reason against the possibility of disgust to afford a pleasurable aesthetic experience, especially when it is combined with the indistinguishability claim. Fear and other negative emotions can be turned into pleasurable ones in art because representation attenuates or cancels their unpleasantness, thus allowing other

[34] Klotz [1764]; as cited in Lessing [1766/1962], 130. Cf. also discussion of Morreall [1985] in Chapter 5.

[35] Mendelssohn [1760].

pleasures such as the pleasures that always accompany negative emotions to become predominant and make the aesthetic experience of them pleasurable. If representation cannot attenuate the unpleasantness of disgust and disgust has no accompanying pleasures of its own, then that creates a sort of a *perfect storm* for disgust. Disgust thus becomes the one (unpleasant) emotion the fine arts have to be wary of.

7. Contrary to what happens with Mendelssohn, however, Lessing's distrust of disgust in art admits of some exceptions. After pointing out that the physically ugly is similar to disgust in causing an experience that has in itself no admixture of pleasure, Lessing adds:

> Furthermore, the disgusting bears exactly the same relation to imitative art as does the ugly. In fact, since its unpleasant effect is more violent, it is even less capable than the ugly of becoming in and of itself a subject for either painting or literature. Only because its effect is likewise softened by verbal expression should I be bold enough to maintain that the poet can employ at least some disgusting features as an ingredient in producing the mixed sensations of the ridiculous and the terrible which he so successfully heightens by the addition of the ugly.[36]

Lessing here clarifies that, in his view, and as far as "poetry", or literature, is concerned, the indistinguishability thesis does not (always) hold. Disgust can in fact be "softened" by words. In virtue of this, it can be used as an ingredient in the production of pleasurable poetic effects. The two effects

[36] Lessing [1766/1962], 132.

he discusses are the ridiculous and the horrible.

Firstly, the ridiculous can in literature be achieved by means of the disgusting. In support of his thesis, he mentions a comic story published in the eighteenth-century newspaper *The Connoisseur* with respect to which he says:

> We know how dirty the Hottentots are and how many things that awaken disgust and loathing in us are beautiful, comely, and sacred to them. A piece of flattened cartilage for a nose, flabby breasts which hang down to the navel, the whole body covered with a layer of goat's fat and soot and tanned by the sun, the hair dripping with grease, feet and arms entwined with fresh entrails—think of all in the object of a fiery, worshiping, tender love; hear this expressed in the noble language of sincerity and admiration, and try to keep from laughing.[37]

Moreover, the disgusting in literature can also—even more aptly, in fact—be used to achieve much less light-hearted aesthetic effects:

> The disgusting seems capable of an even greater degree of amalgamation with the terrible [than with the ridiculous]. That which we call horrible is nothing more than the terrible which has been made disgusting. Longinus does not like the [discharge from her nostrils flowed] in Hesiod's picture of Sadness; not so much, it seems to me, because it is a disgusting trait, but because it is

[37] Lessing [1766/1962], 132–3. The story was published in *The Connoisseur*, vol. I, no 21, 20/6/1754, signed by "W.", but attributed by Lessing to a "Lord Chesterfield" (probably Philip Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield).

> one that contributes in no way to the terrible. For he appears to have no objection to the long nails protruding beyond the fingers [...] although long nails are scarcely less disgusting than a running nose. But long nails are also terrible, for they tear the flesh from the cheeks so that the blood streams to the ground: [and from her cheeks blood dripped down to the ground].[38]

In fact, Lessing also mentions further examples to support his claim that the disgusting is compatible with positive literary effects. To be clear, both the case of the ridiculous and of the horrible are for Lessing cases in which the disgusting on its own would not be able to achieve a positive aesthetic effect. It only manages to do so because something else is added to it. In the story of the Hottentots it is the contrast between the noble language of praise and the disgusting subject praised that creates the ridiculous; the disgusting subject represented on its own would have presumably been incapable of producing any positive aesthetic satisfaction. Similarly, in Hesiod's poem, the dribbling nose on its own is an unwanted detail because it does not by itself evoke terror. The discussion of Lessing so far implies that the reason why the disgusting on its own cannot be made aesthetically pleasurable is to be found in Lessing's view that disgust is purely and completely unpleasant.

By contrast, painting cannot for Lessing admit the disgusting even when it is mixed to contribute to the ridiculous or the horrible. This is because

[38] Lessing [1766/1962], 133. (Another translation has: "not so much, I think, because it is a disgusting trait as because it is *one simply so*, and does not in any way contribute to the terrible"; Lessing [1766/1914], 144; emphasis mine.) The comment Lessing refers to is from the Pseudo-Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime* [I or III century]: "How different [from Homer's majesty in a passage from the *Odissey*] is that touch of Hesiod's in his description of sorrow—if the *Shield* is really one of his works: "rheum from her nostrils flowed"—an image not terrible but disgusting" (Pseudo-Longinus [I/III century/1890], IX 5). The reference is to a passage from the *Shield of Heracles*, a short poem attributed to Hesiod. The line referred to (266) says: "Long nails tipped her hands, and she dribbled at the nose, and from her cheeks blood dripped down to the ground" (in Hesiod [750–650BCE/1914]).

for painting there is the additional impediment constituted by the indistinguishability thesis. As Lessing puts it:

> [The disgusting] loses incomparably less of its effect in an imitation which is meant for the eye than in one which is meant for the ear. Consequently, it will blend less closely with elements of the ridiculous and the terrible in the former than in the latter instance, for as soon as our surprise is over and our first eager look satisfied, the disgusting becomes a separate thing again and appears before us in its own crude form.[39]

8. In addition to the two main charges against disgusting art presented here, German-speaking eighteenth-century authors suggested other reasons to be pessimistic about disgust's potential for aesthetic value. I will present these in Chapter 5, in the context of a more thorough discussion of the theoretical merits of the German eighteenth-century received view as a whole. Across the Channel, Edmund Burke shared the substance of Lessing's views on the disgusting in poetry. In another of the eighteenth-century foundational texts in aesthetics, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1759], published just a few years earlier than Lessing's *Laocoön*, Burke devotes a few brief remarks in his Section XXI to the compatibility of the disgusting with the sublime. The section is suggestively entitled "Smell and Taste. Bitters and Stenches". He starts the section by saying:

> *Smells*, and *Tastes*, have some share too, in ideas of greatness; but

[39] Lessing [1766/1962], 137.

> it is a small one, weak in its nature, and confined in its operations. I shall only observe, that no smells or tastes can produce a grand sensation, except excessive bitters, and intolerable stenches. It is true, that these affections of the smell and taste, when they are in their full force, and lean directly upon the sensory, are simply painful, and accompanied with no sort of delight; but when they are moderated, as in a description or narrative, they become sources of the sublime as genuine as any other, and upon the very same principle of a moderated pain.[40]

Leaving aside "excessive bitters", the "intolerable stenches" Burke talks of belong in the category of the disgusting. And what Burke says about them resonates with ideas encountered already in Lessing. First, Burke says that those intolerable stenches can normally afford no pleasure whatsoever. But when, as in literature, they are attenuated, they "become sources of the sublime as genuine as any other".

In support of his claim, Burke goes on to discuss two passages from Virgil's *Aeneid*. In one of them, Burke says, "the stench of the vapour in Albunea conspires so happily with the sacred horror and gloominess of that prophetic forest".[41] In the other, "the poisonous exhalation of Acheron is not forgot, nor does it at all disagree with the other images amongst which it is introduced".[42] In both cases Burke's reasoning closely aligns with Lessing's in acknowledging the capacity of the disgusting to successfully mix with the sublime or terrible.

[40] Burke [1757/1958], 85; Burke's own emphases.
[41] Burke [1757/1958], 85.
[42] Burke [1757/1958], 85.

Interestingly, however, Burke goes on to contrast the case of the sublime with that of the ridiculous:

> I have added these examples, because some friends, for whose judgment I have great deference, were of opinion, that if the sentiment stood nakedly by itself, it would be subject at first view to burlesque and ridicule; but this I imagine would principally arise from considering the bitterness and stench in company with mean and contemptible ideas, with which it must be owned they are often united; such an union degrades the sublime in all other instances as well as in those. But it is one of the tests by which the sublimity of an image is to be tried, not whether it becomes mean when associated with mean ideas; but whether, when united with images of an allowed grandeur, the whole composition is supported with dignity. Things which are terrible are always great; but when things possess disagreeable qualities, or such as have indeed some degree of danger, but of a danger easily overcome, they are merely *odious*, as toads and spiders.[43]

Like Lessing, Burke here acknowledges the capacity of the disgusting to be a source of both the ridiculous and the sublime. More (explicitly) than Lessing, however, Burke suggests that it is the ideas with which it is associated that crucially determine whether the disgusting becomes a source of one or the other. If associated with "mean and contemptible ideas" the disgusting will produce the ridiculous; if associated with "images of an allowed grandeur"—as in the examples from Virgil—it will be a source of the

[43] Burke [1757/1958], 86.

sublime.

9. Published for the first time in the same year as Burke's *Enquiry*, Hume's "Of Tragedy" contains a brief reference to disgust. However, its theoretical importance in the history of the aesthetics of disgust is limited, especially if compared to the relevance of Hume's general account of tragedy. I will discuss the latter at length in Chapter 5. In a sketch, Hume argues that the aesthetic pleasure characteristic of accomplished tragedies depends partly on the emotional unpleasantness of the events that they portray. Such unpleasantness is, Hume argues, "converted" into aesthetic pleasure. Towards the end of his argument, Hume presents a few circumstances in which the mechanisms behind such conversion backfire, or do not work in the way proper to accomplished tragedies. One circumstance concerns the disgusting. Hume says:

> An action, represented in tragedy, may be too bloody and atrocious. It may excite such movements of horror as will not soften into pleasure; and the greatest energy of expression, bestowed on descriptions of that nature, serves only to augment our uneasiness. Such is that action represented in the *Ambitious Stepmother*, where a venerable old man, raised to the height of fury and despair, rushes against a pillar, and striking his head upon it, besmears it all over with mingled brains and gore. The English theatre abounds too much with such shocking images.[44]

Although historically intriguing, Hume's dismissive comment of Poet Laure-

[44] Hume [1757/1777], 24, Miller edition 224.

ate Nicholas Rowe's play [1700] is not a general indictment of disgust in art. Although it certainly has both disgusting subject and effect, the scene in question is condemned by Hume because *too* disgusting. Nothing suggests a general pessimism on Hume's part towards disgusting art generally.[45]

10. Symbolically closing the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* [1790] represents both the maturation of the eighteenth-century aesthetic reflection and a new, in many respects different, way of thinking about aesthetics. For his prominent role and influence in the history of aesthetics (more than for the intrinsic value of his discussion of the issue), it is therefore worth considering the few lines in §48 of (the first part of) the third *Critique* that Kant devotes to the role of disgust in the fine arts. In the context of his discussion of the nature of artistic genius, Kant says:

> Where fine art evidences its superiority is in the beautiful descriptions it gives of things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like, can (as evils) be very beautifully described, nay even represented in pictures. One kind of ugliness alone is incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all aesthetic delight, and consequently artistic beauty, namely, that which excites *disgust* [*Ekel*]. For, as in this strange sensation, which depends purely on the imagination, the object is represented as insisting, as it were,

[45] Korsmeyer [2011] therefore reads too much in Hume when she comments: "In his ruminations about tragedy, Hume managed to reconcile beauty with the arousal of sorrow, terror, and anxiety, but he too drew the line at the depiction of "mingled brains and gore" on stage" (45). In recent, unpublished work ("Disgust, Appreciation, and Hume's Emotional Conversion"), Eva Dadlez argues precisely for the applicability of Hume's conversion account to disgusting art.

> upon our enjoying it, while we still set our face against it, the artificial representation of the object is no longer distinguishable from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and so it cannot possibly be regarded as beautiful.[46]

On the interpretation of Kant's complex last sentence I agree with Menninghaus that it is essentially a restatement of Mendelssohn and co.'s received view.[47] Both the content and the terminology used in the sentence confirm this. Kant starts by saying that disgust is a "strange sensation, which depends purely on the imagination". Compare this with Mendelssohn as quoted above: "Due to the law of imagination, the repellent sensation of disgust, however, emerges from an idea in the soul alone". Moreover, Kant says, the "representation of the object is no longer distinguishable from the nature of the object itself in our sensation". This is Mendelssohn's indistinguishability claim:

> Its [disgust's] displeasure did not result from the assumption that the evil is real, but from the latter's mere idea, and this is really present. The sensations of disgust thus are always nature, never imitation.

Much as Mendelssohn, then, Kant identifies disgust as the only unpleasant emotion that is not compatible with aesthetic value or beauty.[48]

As Menninghaus correctly points out, however, amidst the general frame-

[46] Kant [1790/1978], 173–4.
[47] Menninghaus [2003], 103ff.
[48] As well as the indistinguishability claim and the consequent pessimism about disgusting art, in fact, Kant also shares with Mendelssohn and his contemporaries the other main charge against disgusting art, viz. disgust's peculiar unmixed unpleasantness. He points out in the *Reflexionen zur Anthropologie* that: "Disgust is in itself and without recompense unpleasant. For this reason, the mind is not entertained by disgusting things, as it is indeed by sad ones" (218; as cit. in Menninghaus [2003]).

work that Kant borrows from earlier eighteenth-century discussions there is one element of novelty. This is the thought that disgusting art follows a dynamic of invitation to enjoyment and repulsion: "as in this strange sensation, which depends purely on the imagination, the object is represented as insisting, as it were, upon our enjoying it, while we still set our face against it...". Although its content is obviously Kant's own addition to the received view, it proves difficult to understand with certainty quite what the clause means within Kant's characteristically convoluted sentence. Here, too, Menninghaus himself does a remarkable job at shedding light on the issue. He does so by linking it to remarks on disgust elsewhere in Kant's *corpus*.

Menninghaus starts by emphasizing the double connotation of the German word that standard translations render with 'enjoying'/'enjoyment':[49]

> *Genuss* does not necessarily here imply the meaning of pleasure or enjoyment, but simply signifies consumption, inner "intake" in general, as the modus operandi of all tasting and smelling.[50]

Accordingly, Menninghaus's English translator has Kant say:

> that strange sensation, resting on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it were pressing us to consume it [*zum Genusse aufdrängen*], although this is just what we are violently resisting; and hence...[51]

Subsequently, Menninghaus convincingly connects the gustatory reference

[49] Cf. also Kant [1790/2000], which has: "since in this strange sensation, resting on sheer imagination, the object is represented as if it were imposing the enjoyment which we are nevertheless forcibly resisting..." (190).

[50] Menninghaus [2003], 105; the word 'intake' is a reference to Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* [1785].

[51] Menninghaus [2003], 104; cf. also 419.

to Kant's anthropology writings. Here Kant suggests an understanding of disgust as a reaction to the prospect of ingestion. As Menninghaus says:

> in order to experience something as disgusting, it must first have entered—however partially—our sense of smell or taste; it has to be "taken in" or "consumed" before being judged as totally unenjoyable [...] Kant takes the model of vomiting that always presupposes a previous "consumption" more literally than his predecessors: even in its metaphoric variants, disgust is for him "a stimulus to discharge what has been consumed through the shortest path of the gullet (to vomit)." It is an "attempt ... to expel an idea that has been offered for consumption."[52] [53]

Carrying over his earlier view of disgust, Kant is in the third *Critique* characterizing disgust as a rejection of an object of potential ingestion. Here, however, Menninghaus's analysis ceases to be helpful. He simply minimizes the value of Kant's addition to the received view on disgusting art, and sums up Kant's remarks on disgusting art in the third *Critique* as "almost entirely a citation, less a continuation than a burial of the elaborate disgust-debate of the 1750s and 1760s".[54]

However, some questions remain unanswered. Why does Kant mention disgust's characteristic dynamic of invitation to enjoyment and repulsion? The structure of Kant's sentence in §48 clearly suggests a causal or explanatory role between disgust's dynamic and the indistinguishability claim: "as

[52] Menninghaus [2003], 105–6; the two passages Menninghaus quotes are again from Kant's *Anthropology*.
[53] Cf. Pole [1983], 225 for a contemporary (sketch of a) view of disgust as presupposing the possibility of ingestion.
[54] Menninghaus [2003], 103.

in this strange sensation [...] the artificial representation of the object is no longer distinguishable from the nature of the object itself". How can disgust's enjoyment/repulsion dynamic cause or explain the indistinguishability claim? For Mendelssohn the indistinguishability claim was motivated by the central role in disgust elicitation played by the "mere idea" of the disgusting (and "[d]ue to the law of imagination"). Kant also appeals to the role of imagination ("this strange sensation, which depends purely on the imagination"); but interposes disgust's enjoyment/repulsion dynamic in the explanatory chain going from imagination to the indistinguishability claim.

Pierre Bourdieu [1984] attributes greater value to Kant's appeal to disgust's enjoyment/repulsion dynamic in the third *Critique*, than Menninghaus does. Bourdieu interprets the reference to disgust's dynamic in the context of Kant's distinction between judgements of the *agreeable* and judgements of the *beautiful*. At the beginning of the third *Critique*, Kant famously distinguishes between the two types of judgements, the former being purely sensory and subjective judgements (e.g. the preference for a flavour of ice cream) and the latter holding a claim to universal validity. The pleasure (or lack thereof) that one finds in the agreeable is different from the pleasure (or lack thereof) that one finds in the beautiful, since the former is *interested*—in the existence of the object, thus being linked with desire—and the latter is *disinterested*. It is with this distinction in mind that, Bourdieu claims, Kant sees in the invitation to enjoyment of the disgusting the "enslaving force of the 'agreeable'"and therefore relegates the disgusting to the category of the agreeable.[55]

[55] Bourdieu [1984], 486–91; my discussion of Bourdieu here is based on Menninghaus [2003], 105 and William Ian Miller [1998], 169.

On this basis, Bourdieu goes on to interpret Kant's remarks as a condemnation of "the crude, vulgar taste which revels in this imposed enjoyment [of the disgusting]"; the disgust Kant refers to is "a disgust for objects which impose enjoyment".[56] Menninghaus correctly points out the implausibility of Bourdieu's view, for its blurring of the distinction between the unpleasantness of the disgusting and the pleasantness of the agreeable. However, a compromise between Menninghaus's textual awareness and Bourdieu's philosophical insight is possible and desirable.

Kant's remarks on disgust in §48 seem to me an attempt to build Kant's own concerns about the agreeable/beautiful distinction within the German-speaking eighteenth-century received view on disgusting art. This is why Kant inserts the enjoyment/repulsion dynamic within the explanatory chain going from the role of imagination in disgust elicitation to the indistinguishability claim. However, Kant's attempt is feeble and ultimately unsuccessful. This is for two main (related) reasons. The first is that it blurs the distinction between representations that do and do not warrant a judgement of beauty. Kant contrasts the agreeable to the beautiful because the former is subjective and interested, while the latter is universal and disinterested. But this contrast is orthogonal to the nature/imitation distinction. A picture of a meal on a restaurant's menu, for example, is a representation; nonetheless, it is an appropriate object of a judgement of agreeableness. Secondly, a still life with fruit cannot be so easily ruled out from the kind of artistic representations that can be judged as beautiful. And yet, it invites ingestion at

[56] Bourdieu [1984], 488; as cited in Menninghaus [2003], 105. Bourdieu uses his interpretation of Kant within his more general argument for the causal relation between social hierarchies and criteria of aesthetic taste.

least as much as a disgusting object does (in the sense in question). Even if theoretically weak in Kant's text, the connection between disgustingness and agreeableness was not abandoned after Kant.

11. One further statement of this connection is to be found in what, in the following century, Arthur Schopenhauer says about the disgusting in art in *The World as Will and Representation* [1859]. As part of his discussion of art and aesthetic experience as a way of transcending the conflict present in the world of human experience, Schopenhauer claims that art should avoid what is *charming* or *attractive* as they impede a purifying aesthetic contemplation.[57] Analogously,

> There is also a negatively charming, even more objectionable than the positively charming just discussed, and that is the disgusting or offensive. Just like the charming in the proper sense, it rouses the will of the beholder, and therefore disturbs purely aesthetic contemplation. But it is a violent non-willing, a repugnance, that it excites; it rouses the will by holding before it objects that are abhorrent. It has therefore always been recognised as absolutely inadmissible in art, where even the ugly can be tolerated in its proper place so long as it is not disgusting...[58]

Here the nature of repulsion, as something which rouses the will, conflicts with the nature and purpose of aesthetic contemplation as what constitutes a moment of rest in the constant struggle inherent in willing. The similarity with Kant's remarks on disgust in the fine arts is evident. This might even

[57] See Arthur Schopenhauer [1859/1969], §40, 207–8.
[58] Schopenhauer [1859/1969], 208.

suggest a direct Kantian influence on this passage, especially given Schopenhauer's general indebtedness to, and close knowledge of, Kant's work.[59]

12. Only slightly less negative towards the use of disgusting representations in art is the attitude of another nineteenth-century author, Karl Rosenkranz. Traditionally considered as a philosopher writing in the Hegelian tradition, Rosenkranz publishes in 1853 a unique work, a monograph exclusively devoted to the *Aesthetics of the Ugly*. In typical Hegelian fashion, Rosenkranz's project in the book is to show how the ugly serves the important yet vicarious role of highlighting the value of the beautiful.[60] In his book Rosenkranz goes through different types of ugliness and devotes one section to "The nauseating".[61] In this section, Rosenkranz reveals an attitude towards the acceptability of the disgusting/nauseating in art that is to some extent consonant with Lessing's. Throughout the section he repeatedly warns of the dangers of representing the disgusting in art, but also distinguishes cases in which it is to be completely avoided and cases in which exceptions can be made. In keeping with his Hegelian background, however, Rosenkranz's approach is polarized around the dichotomy positive vs negative values/ideas, rather than around the pleasure/displeasure dichotomy as in Lessing.

Rosenkranz mentions several different examples of artworks and types of contexts, in which representations of the disgusting can be found. Amongst these, the main exceptions to his general distrust of disgusting art fall (again,

[59] Schopenhauer's two major philosophical influences were Plato and Kant, the philosophy of both of whom he was introduced to by Gottlob Ernst Schulze, one of his teachers at the University of Göttingen; cf. Robert Wicks [2014] (accessed on 3/9/2014).

[60] Cf. Elio Franzini's Introduction to Rosenkranz [1853/2004].

[61] *Ekelhafte* in the German original text, literally meaning what is 'disgusting', 'revolting', 'nauseating' (from *Ekel*, 'disgust'). The Italian translation I refer to here, Rosenkranz [1853/2004]—to the best of my knowledge, Rosenkranz's book is not currently available in English translation—chooses 'nauseating'.

not too dissimilarly from Lessing) into two categories: the comic and the edifying. As far as the former is concerned, he says for instance that:

> The coarse poignancy of popular language likes to use filth as a last resort to injury, to express the absolute worthlessness of something and signal extreme aversion. [...] But poetry can make use of that only for grotesque comedy. I have already mentioned, as an example of this, Blepyrus in Aristophanes's *Ecclesiazusae*. In a comedy in the style of Aristophanes, *Die Mondzugler*, Hoffmann ridicules the dialectic of modern philosophy, assigning to competing philosophers the task of defining the concept of 'shit'...[62]

Interestingly, both of the examples mentioned by Rosenkranz here are examples of caricature or satire. In his later discussion of vomiting, Rosenkranz mentions again the comic as one of the cases in which the disgusting is acceptable in art, and there again he mentions two examples of caricature or satyrical art: William Hogarth's etching *A Midnight Modern Conversation* and an Ancient Greek vase painting of Homer vomiting, surrounded by many dwarf-like figures representing the later Greek poets who eat what he expels.[63] The emphasis on caricature is not accidental and is in keeping with Rosenkranz's general view of the comic as a sort of Hegelian contradiction, or overcoming, of the ugly.

That the comic has such a role is made clear by Rosenkranz since the "Introduction" to the *Aesthetics of the Ugly*. After pointing out that the ugly is conceptually dependent on the beautiful as the latter's negation,

[62] Rosenkranz [1853/2004], 205; my translation. Rosenkranz discusses the story of Blepyrus earlier on (127–8) as having caricatural and satyrical purposes.
[63] See Rosenkranz [1853/2004], 207; my translation.

Rosenkranz goes on to say:

> This intimate connection of the beautiful with the ugly as its self-destruction is also the grounds of the possibility of the ugly to negate itself in turn: the ugly existing as negation of the beautiful, it can solve again its contradiction of the beautiful becoming again one with it. In such a process, the beautiful comes across as what forcefully subjects again to its supremacy the rebellion of the ugly. In this reconciliation an infinite serenity arises, which elicits in us a smile, laughter. In this movement, the ugly frees itself of its hybrid, selfish nature; it recognizes its impotence and becomes comic.[64]

The comic is the negation of the negation of the beautiful, thus representing a celebration of what has conceptual primacy and is valuable in itself, i.e. the beautiful. What Rosenkranz has in mind is the laughter excited by what is ugly, the ridiculing of it.[65] That is why caricature and satire are especially important for Rosenkranz for in them the ridiculing of the ugly acquires a special meaning. This meaning parallels the special significance Rosenkranz attributes to the comic as a re-affirmation of the beautiful.

Now, since the disgusting, or nauseating, is for Rosenkranz a species of the ugly, it will be acceptable in art as a source of the comic. Laughter will, as it were, nullify the negativity represented by the disgusting, thus ideally restoring the supremacy of the beautiful.[66] The exception made by

[64] Rosenkranz [1853/2004], 35; my translation.

[65] The view of the comic as the negation of the ugly does not first appear in Rosenkranz. Another nineteenth-century philosopher writing in the Hegelian tradition, Arnold Ruge, holds the view in his 1837 *Neue Vorschule der Äesthetik*; see Franzini, Introduction to Rosenkranz [1853/2004], 12.

[66] Cf. Menninghaus [2003], 139ff., who agrees with the interpretation of Rosenkranz suggested here.

Rosenkranz for the comic calls to mind Lessing's remarks on the compatibility of the disgusting and the ridiculous in poetry. However, in keeping with his overall project, Rosenkranz's emphasis is on positivity vs negativity, affirmation vs negation/overcoming. By contrast, as shown earlier, Lessing's exception for the ridiculous was being made in virtue of the *pleasure* afforded by the latter.[67]

In the case of the edifying it is even more evident how the disgusting is something that has to be contradicted or overcome if it is to be allowed in art. With reference to images of the resurrection of Lazarus, Rosenkranz for instance says that:

> One could say that with Christianity decomposition became a positive artistic subject, and painting has represented the resurrection of Lazarus, who the Scriptures say already stank. [...] The positive moment in this subject remains the idea of the overcoming of death through divine life as coming from Christ...[68]

In his later discussion of revolting illnesses, he adds:

> [A]rt can only represent a revolting illness insofar as at the same time it balances it with ethical or religious ideas. [A representation of] Job, covered with wounds, is to be interpreted with divine theodicy in mind. Hartmann von der Aue's *Der Arme Heinrich* is certainly a subject which is almost brutal and it is difficult to understand why the Germans have reprinted it so often in so many forms—both in the original and in the most diverse versions—to

[67] Cf. Chapter 6 for a view of disgusting comedy that bears some resemblance to Rosenkranz's.
[68] Rosenkranz [1853/2004], 205; my translation.

> the young: but it still contains the idea of free sacrifice, even though in accompanying circumstances which are very repulsive.[69]

Compare what Rosenkranz says in these passages with Lessing's discussion of the horrible as a mixture of the terrible and the disgusting. For Lessing the horrible could be a legitimate subject for art in virtue of the contribution to the mixture that the terrible brings, with its capacity to afford aesthetic pleasure. By contrast, Rosenkranz's focus is not on pleasure but on the presence of positive, edifying *ideas* that counterbalance the aesthetic effects of the disgusting. Once more, although it retains some features of eighteenth-century debates, Rosenkranz's thought—like Schopenhaeur's above—shows its nineteenth-century origins in the shift of aesthetics away from a primary attention to pleasure.

13. Kant's influence on aesthetics was great for a long while. Partly for this reason, disgusting art went, as it were, underground between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as a topic of philosophical reflection—at least in one main philosophical strand.[70] Things went somewhat differently in art history and criticism, as well as in some sections of so-called 'Continental philosophy'. In both, the topic received some attention in the second part of the twentieth century, mainly as a result of the influence of Georges Bataille's and Julia Kristeva's work.[71] Recently, however, the topic has resurfaced in

[69] Rosenkranz [1853/2004], 205–6; my translation. *Der Arme Heinrich* is an epic story attributed to the twelfth- or thirteenth-century German poet Hartmann von Aue.

[70] Cf. Arthur Danto [2000]'s quote, in epigraph to the Introduction.

[71] See Bataille [1928/1982] and Kristeva [1982]. The latter has had considerably more influence within academia (see e.g. Meagher [2003]), while the former's peculiar brand of Surrealist thought has had its major influence on provocative or transgressive artists, including Francis Bacon, Paul McCarthy, and the Chapman brothers; cf. <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/apr/23/art>. For work in art history, see e.g. Chaouli [1996] and Chaouli [2003], and Clair [2000].

analytic aesthetics, especially in the work of Carolyn Korsmeyer.[72] [73] The reasons for this renewal of interest are likely to be found in the increased relevance of analytic aesthetics, as well as perhaps in the decline of Kantian influence in aesthetics, and the contemporaneous rediscovery of non-British eighteenth-century sources. An additional reason can be found in the cultural prominence, in the last two or three decades of the twentieth century, of provocative, or transgressive art that makes wide use of the disgusting (e.g. Cindy Sherman, Paul McCarthy, young British art *à la* Damien Hirst and Chapman brothers). Finally, another influence has been the coming of age of the experimental study of disgust as a psychological phenomenon. Neglected at first in favour of other, less troubling affects, the emotion of disgust has then, since the late 1980s, become the focus of a significantly wide research programme. The results of this programme have driven in a large part the renewal of interest in disgust within aesthetics (and the humanities more generally). The next chapter will take a close look at these results, as well as at other sources, with the aim of understanding the way disgust works.

[72] Cf. Chapters 3 and 5.

[73] Other contemporary philosophical discussions of the disgusting in art include: Pole [1983], Perniola [1999], Danto [2001] and Danto [2003], ch. 2, Talon-Hugon [2003], Kuplen [2011], a special issue of the inter-disciplinary online journal *Film-Philosophy* (15(2), 2011, <http://www.film-philosophy.com/index.php/f-p/issue/view/22>), and Robinson [forthcoming].

2. The Emotion of Disgust

1. The last chapter has laid out some of the main philosophical problems at stake in the present thesis, and also suggested some of their possible solutions. However, in delving deep into the role of disgust in art, one foundational issue has been left unquestioned, viz. that of what disgust is as a psychological phenomenon. The present chapter aims to clarify that issue, with an eye to the features of disgust that are most interesting for the study of the aesthetics problems. In particular, I will emphasize six of disgust's features: (1) the universality of the disgust system in humans, (2) the role of cultural learning in disgust acquisition, (3) disgust's ideational character, (4) its contamination sensitivity, (5) its object-centricity, and (6) disgust's unconsciousness of purpose.

2. Disgust is a universal emotion in that we do not know any human culture that does not know of, or recognize it. The existence of a word, or several, referring to the emotion in the vast majority of the major contemporary, and some of the ancient, languages, is one piece of evidence in support of this claim. Aside from English ('disgust', 'grossed out'), these include Italian ('disgusto', 'schifo'), French ('dégoût', 'dégueulasse'), Spanish ('asco'), German ('Ekel'), Japanese ('ken-o', 'iya'), Chinese ('yànwù'), Latin ('taedium', 'fastidium') etc. In fact, the English word 'disgust' is relatively recent, having entered the language from the Old French 'desgoust' or the Italian 'disgusto' (literally, "bad

taste") in the 17th century.[1] Moreover, its usage only became widespread more than a century later.[2]

The emotion itself does not however appear in the seventeenth century. Writing in the very early years of existence of the word, for example, William Shakespeare never uses it. He does however refer to the emotion, typically using for this purpose the phrase 'gorge rising'. Moreover, as mentioned, some of the words for disgust in other modern languages predate the English word. Some ancient languages, too, had a way to refer to the emotion: Latin speakers for instance used 'taedium' or 'fastidium' for the purpose.[3]

3. The universality of disgust is further demonstrated by the existence of a fixed set of expressions of disgust common to cultures the most remote. Charles Darwin was the first to show this in print in 1872, in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.[4] In this pioneering study on the emotions, Darwin reports evidence of a universal facial expression for disgust. This expression, Darwin affirms on the basis of his correspondences, is shared by peoples as diverse, and living as far apart, as the Indians of America, the Greenlanders, the Hindus and the Fuegians of Tierra del Fuego. Darwin also reports commonalities in the association of spitting to disgust.[5]

This kind of evidence is now commonly accepted by cognitive scientists, via the mediation of contemporary work pioneered by Paul Ekman from the 1970s onwards.[6] Ekman's work confirmed the substance of Darwin's observations and

[1] Collins date the import at 1601, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-15619543>; the OED mentions a first occurrence in 1611.

[2] A Google Books search for both 'disgust' and its older spelling ('difguft') shows a peak in printed occurrences around the middle of the eighteenth century. Cf. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-15619543>.

[3] Cf. Kaster [2001].

[4] Darwin [1872/1892].

[5] See Darwin [1872/1892], 254–62.

[6] Cf. Ekman *et al.* [1972] and Ekman [1989]; cf. also de Sousa [2013] (accessed on 20/4/2013).

results, as well as integrating them into a systematic theory of emotions, or, more precisely, of basic emotions or affective programmes.[7] According to (the most widespread version of) this theory, disgust is one of six basic emotions, a category also including joy/happiness, sadness, anger, fear and surprise. Such basic emotions are identified primarily on the basis of the universality of their characteristic facial expressions. More generally, the evidence is that basic emotions are characterized by a fixed and universal set of responses, which includes facial expressions but also, more generally, behavioural and phenomenological responses, as well as, to some extent, physiological and neurological markers.[8]

The theory that such evidence suggests is that there is a discrete number of ancient, evolutionarily established affective programmes, that are characterized by more or less fixed patterns of elicitation and response. According to this theory, such patterns were established because they proved beneficial to the fitness of our ancestors in several ways. The fitness benefits commonly hypothesized include protection from physical threats, social cohesion and effectiveness in decision making. Although to a certain extent integrated into the complex cognition proper to the human neo-cortex, Ekman's affective programmes are essentially correlated to the evolutionarily more ancient limbic system. It is their relative insulation from more complex cognitive activity that is responsible for the relative stability characteristic of their functioning.

Although currently mainstream, the scientific paradigm associated with Ekman's name is not universally accepted. Alternative lists of biologically based

[7] Cf. Griffiths [1997].

[8] Phenomenologically, the disgust response is one of revulsion. This is accompanied by behaviours of detachment from and avoidance of the target. Physiologically, it is marked by a decrease in heart rate. Some degree of parasympathetic autonomic response and increased salivation seem also to be associated with disgust. Cf. Rozin and McCauley [2008] and Angyal [1941]. Nausea or vomiting are only loosely associated with disgust: they neither necessarily accompany disgust, nor are they exclusive responses of disgust; cf. Knapp [2003].

emotions or affects are endorsed by some.[9] All such lists, however, include disgust.[10] In two notable cases disgust is not however categorized as an emotion: (1) in Panksepp's neuroscientifically oriented list, disgust is not a basic emotion but is included in the lower-cognitive class of "sensory affects" (together with such phenomena as pain); (2) in Royzman and Sabini [2001], who present more traditionally psychological arguments to support a similar claim, i.e. that disgust is not sufficiently cognitively sophisticated to deserve categorization as an emotion.

I remain unconvinced by the extent of the conclusion reached by Panksepp and Royzman *et al.,* to the effect that disgust is not sufficiently cognitive to be an emotion. However, I am sympathetic to some of the arguments put forward for the claim that disgust is peculiarly less cognitive than many other basic emotions. In particular, Royzman *et al.*'s argument will be important for my purposes later in this chapter. I postpone its discussion for now.[11] What suffices to say here, however, is that, whether labelled as an 'emotion' or not, and whatever the particular theory of emotions considered, the best ethnographical, psychological and neuroscientific evidence available makes it uncontroversial that disgust is part of the universal baggage of emotional capabilities of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.[12] In the face of the evidence of stable and common patterns of input/output and neurological bases of disgust, a radical social constructionist view defies all plausibility. According to such a view, disgust would purely be

[9] See, most notably, Plutchik [1962], Tomkins [2008] and Panksepp [1998] and [2007]. Then there are those who endorse a different approach altogether to emotion categorization. On such an approach there is no list of basic emotions; rather, emotions are individuated in terms of possession of a number of basic characteristics, or *dimensions*. See e.g. Wundt [1897], and Russell [1980] and [2003]; as cit. in Cochrane [2009]. Plutchik's is a hybrid between a basic-emotion and a dimensional theory.

[10] Plutchik includes disgust as one of eight "primary emotions". Tomkins includes disgust among the nine biologically based "affects".

[11] See also Toronchuk and Ellis [2007], for a critique of Panksepp's views on disgust.

[12] Cf. also Tybur and Griskevicius [2009].

attributable to a socio-cultural construction. As a matter of fact, such views are rarely defended.

4. The view that is generally regarded as the most radical social constructionist view advanced for disgust is Mary Douglas's anthropologically informed theory of the impure.[13] Douglas's theory explains concepts and behaviours related to *impurity* in terms of the violation of categorial boundaries. According to her, a given culture considers some things impure because they threaten the validity of that particular culture's categorization of the world. As such, that of impure things is a culturally constructed class.[14]

In fact, Douglas's own theory is not explicitly a theory of disgust. However, the class of impure things as Douglas characterizes it includes many common disgust elicitors.[15] (Bodily excretions and secretions, for instance, are commonly regarded both as impure and disgusting.) On Douglas's theory, they are so in virtue of their ambiguous ontological status. For faeces, for instance, the ambiguity is: are they part of the (human or animal) body, or are they an inanimate external object?

Douglas's theory is now old as it predates the beginning of the systematic programme of research on disgust that began in the late 1980s. Moreover, it is not clear to what extent Douglas saw herself as providing a theory of disgust. However, considered as a theory of disgust, it suffers from the fatal flaw of being unable to predict with much accuracy common members of the class

[13] See Douglas [1966/2003].

[14] Here and throughout the thesis, and except where otherwise indicated (e.g. in the discussion of object- and situation-centricity later on in this chapter), 'thing' and 'object' (and their cognates) are used irrespectively of metaphysical distinctions between objects, situations, events etc.

[15] Douglas appears to have had, at least to some extent, disgust in mind if one is to judge from the 2003 preface to the Routledge Classics edition of her book, in which she explicitly mentions disgust (unlike anywhere in the book itself): "biologists have thought that dirt, in the form of bodily excretions, produces a universal feeling of disgust. They should remember that there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification" (Douglas [1966/2003], xvii).

of disgusting things. It does not rule out of the class categorially interstitial things like, for instance, robots: regardless of whether they are animate or inanimate creatures, we are rarely grossed out by a robot. Although certain very realistic robotic devices may be said to be uncanny, they are not disgusting.[16] Other prominent categorially interstitial kinds of things that do not commonly disgust are oddities in the fauna (e.g. penguins), flora (e.g. dwarf trees), and holes or holed things (e.g. donuts).[17] Moreover, a Douglas-inspired theory of disgust excludes from the class of disgusting things many of its otherwise obvious members. All sorts of animals (insects, spiders, pigs etc.) are disgusting for many people in many cultures. Many such animals, however, would seem to fall straightforwardly into perfectly legitimate categories.[18]

One can certainly make efforts to save this Douglas-inspired theory of disgust from each of these counterexamples. For instance, one could say that insects are disgusting in many cultures because interstitial between the category of, say, mammals and birds. But then, one would have to explain why, for example, people in New Guinea eat fried grasshoppers.[19] Such an endeavour might have good chances of success in some cases, but it becomes more difficult to accomplish successfully given the number of counterexamples that can be moved to the theory. However, categorial violation is a very porous notion, especially when applied to entire human cultures.[20] This means that it is of limited theoretical usefulness. There are lots of different categorial systems in any one culture, many of which implicit, ill-defined or inconsistent. Moreover,

[16] One may even go so far as to say that such devices "creep one out", but this is really just a metaphorical way of expressing the uncanniness that one feels. Cf. later in this chapter for more on metaphorical disgust.
[17] See Royzman and Sabini [2001], 40–1.
[18] Cf. Rozin and Fallon [1987].
[19] Cf. Colli and Saviem [2011]; cf. also Herz [2012].
[20] Cf. Chapter 5 for more discussion of the porousness of the concept of *categorial violation*.

the boundaries of many of these categories are notoriously more vague than certain (neo-)positivistic thought would have hoped them to be.[21]

On a closer look, however, Douglas's view need not advocate social constructionism about the emotion of disgust. Even when interpreted as a theory of disgust, her view only advocates the socio-cultural variability of disgust elicitors. But this is compatible with a hard-wired emotional capability to feel disgust in certain culturally invariant ways. Such an emotional capability would have evolved to ensure avoidance of categorially interstitial things and situations (for instance in order to enforce the socio-cultural order).[22] If interpreted in this way, however, Douglas's view would not even aim to challenge the point I was interested in making, which concerned the universality of the emotion of disgust.

5. One last potential challenge to the universality of disgust that is worth considering concerns the evidence that comes from children raised outside of human interaction. Such evidence is not abundant, given the unlikelihood of coming across occurrences of this circumstance, which is greater the closer one gets to the present day. In addition, there are issues of accuracy and reliability with evidence that is not recent. However, the evidence that there is converges in suggesting that children raised in complete isolation from human society are not disgusted by even the most common of disgust elicitors: raw meat of any kind, offal, carrions, filth and foul smells.[23]

[21] Cf. e.g. all the debates on prototype or exemplar theories of concepts in psychology, or more recently on linguistic vagueness in philosophy.

[22] Cf. De Block and Cuypers [2012] for a theory of socio-moral disgust along a compatibilist line of this kind.

[23] Malson [1972] collects such evidence; cf. also Itard [1972] in the same volume. Herz [2012] notices an incident in which the so-called "wild boy of Aveyron" throws away a dead bird after smelling it; this is for her the sign of a basic rejection of rotted meat. This circumstance can however be attributed to simple distaste for the smell (cf. also below) rather than to disgust. As a matter of fact, the incident in question also shows, as Jean Itard notices in reporting it, the boy's willingness to eat a dead animal.

However, such evidence does not constitute a challenge to the universality of disgust. Instead, it is more correctly interpreted as a challenge to the universality of disgust as an actualized emotion. It is common to illustrate this by means of an analogy with language.[24] It is generally agreed that humans have an innate capacity to learn a language, although which particular language(s) each individual learns will depend on the particular individual's cultural experiences. A particular individual's capacity to learn a language is especially high during a relatively short time window in their early years. Moreover, beyond this window learning a new language becomes hard work, to the point that it is highly unlikely if at all possible to achieve any complete mastery of a non-native language.

Disgust works analogously (in some respects). Although the capacity to be disgusted is part of the innate arsenal of the human mind (and body), what things each of us will find disgusting crucially depends on the socio-cultural context in which we are raised. This is the theoretical picture that the case of feral children most likely suggests. These individuals in fact grow up in a context in which they are not taught disgust: no humans are around to raise them and disgust is likely a distinctive human emotion.[25] In this context, their innate predisposition to learn disgust is not actualized. Moreover, the evidence suggests, the attempts to "civilize" these children by teaching them disgust and good manners can only achieve limited success. Analogous results are in fact reached for language learning.[26]

Disgust is thus a universal emotion, in the sense that it is a (non-necessarily

[24] Cf. Herz [2012] and Knapp [2003].
[25] Cf. also below.
[26] Cf. Itard [1972].

actualized) hard-wired human capability. Humans' innate capability for disgust makes sense from an evolutionary point of view, as a defence against diseases and toxic substances. A survey of common disgust elicitors around the world reveals a significant overlap between toxic or disease-causing, and disgusting substances.[27] Moreover, that such a defence would be beneficial to humans is understandable given the plethora of infective dangers that threaten our well-being. As psychologist Rachel Herz notes, it is false that humans are the only animals with no natural predator. The truth is, as she puts it, that "we have a devastating predator and it's microscopic".[28] Disease-carrying micro-organisms are a very significant threat especially, albeit not only, for creatures like us, who have a relatively long life expectancy. For us, it is more likely to die in the long term of a disease, than to meet a fast death at the hands of a bigger predator. Moreover, our condition as omnivores created for us the problem of a very broad set of things that we can eat, thus increasing the chances of incurring pathogens. Fear was inadequate to protect us from toxins and pathogens, whereas disgust would have helped.[29]

Finally, there are also possible evolutionary reasons for the variability in disgust elicitors that disgust's acquisition system allows. This in fact permits the addition (or removal) of elicitors when a culture discovers a dangerous substance it did not know about (or discovers that a substance is not in fact dangerous), or if a new dangerous substance comes about (or becomes innocuous or inert, or disappears). Moreover, variability also allows modulation of disgust across different environments, according, for instance, to nutritional

[27] See Curtis and Biran [2001].
[28] Herz [2012], 78.
[29] Cf. Rozin and McCauley [2008] and Kelly [2011].

habits or conveniences. Insects will for example be commonly not disgusting in environments where they are a convenient nutritional source. Although disgust is universal as a human predisposition, what is disgusting is not universal.

6. Given the kinds of evolutionary purposes that disgust is likely to serve, it would not be too surprising if it turned out to be a uniquely human endowment. This is in fact what the best available zoological data suggests.[30] Such a uniqueness would be yet a further point of similarity between disgust and language. The disgust/language analogy is also justified by the relatively late acquisition of disgust. The available evidence concerning the ontogenesis of disgust suggests an onset for full-blown disgust between the 2.5–3 and 7 years of age, depending on the studies.[31]

Such a late acquisition is consistent with the relatively sophisticated level of cognition involved in disgust. What makes disgust so cognitively demanding is its particular focus on the nature and history of things. Given the phenomenological and behavioural characteristics of the disgust response, disgust is a response essentially directed towards the possibility of contact with things (perceived, believed, imagined etc. as being) of a certain nature, or which (are perceived, believed, imagined etc., to) have a historical relationship of contact with those things. Recognition of such a possibility requires in both cases a fairly complex cognition, viz. recognition of something as a token of a categorial type of thing. Moreover, contact with a disgust elicitor, as a rule, contaminates

[30] Cf. Kelly [2011] and Herz [2012]. Herz also raises the theoretical possibility (yet experimentally untested) that other long-lived animal species, subject to similar threats to their well-being to those faced by humans (e.g. elephants) might also have developed the disgust capacity. Kelly advances a plausible story for disgust's evolution. According to this story, disgust is the uniquely human result of an entanglement between two evolutionarily older systems: one designed to prevent oral incorporation of toxic, poisonous substances, and another designed to avoid pathogens. Outside of the mainstream, Valerie Curtis [2013] argues instead for the presence of disgust in non-human animals.

[31] See Rozin *et al.* [1986a], Rozin *et al.* [1985], Fallon *et al.* [1984], Siegal and Share [1990]; cf. Kelly [2011].

a perfectly acceptable thing, thus transforming the latter into a disgust elicitor. Grasping the concept of contamination, as well as the capacity to keep track of historical chains of contact, are both central features of the disgust response and sophisticated cognitive skills.

7. The two features of disgust just outlined are crucial to disgust: its focus on the nature of its elicitors (which, in line with the literature I will call its "ideational" nature or character)[32] and its sensitivity to contamination.[33] In particular, sensory qualities of things are typically neither sufficient nor necessary to elicit disgust. The relevant distinction to make here is Paul Rozin and April Fallon [1987]'s distinction between disgust and distaste.

Our reaction to bad-tasting substances is one of distaste. One can find the taste of broccoli or grapefruit distasteful (because, say, too sour), without being disgusted by either broccoli or grapefruit. In this case, one would not avoid general contact with either the vegetable or the fruit, but will simply prefer not to taste them. Moreover, broccoli or grapefruit do not contaminate, i.e. it would be acceptable for someone to touch or even eat something that had been in contact with broccoli or grapefruit. This is what some of us regularly do when offered a steak with broccoli: we put it to one side of the plate and proceed to eat the steak with gusto.

Something is, by contrast, disgusting in virtue of its being (perceived, believed, imagined etc., as being) a token of a particular type of thing, or of its (being perceived etc. as) having been in contact with something disgusting—rather than in virtue of something's tasting one way or another. Very few of

[32] See for instance Rozin and Fallon [1987]. Note that this sense is different from the sense in which Miller [2004], 41 talks of "ideational disgust".

[33] This is one of the reasons to be cautious in considering instances of so-called "moral" or "social disgust" as instances of disgust proper. Cf. below.

us have ever tasted very common disgust elicitors like urine, faeces, or insects. Yet many of us find all of these things disgusting. In fact, some disgusting things can actually taste surprisingly nice, if one manages to suspend or overcome one's disgust. In fact, so long as one is disgusted, if something disgusting tastes bad, then it might just be the consequence of its being disgusting.[34]

A perfectly analogous reasoning distinguishes disgust from the unpleasantness felt at sensory qualities perceived through other sensory modalities, which one might call 'dis-smell', 'dis-hearing' etc.[35] Concerning smell, Herz *et al.* [2001] showed experimentally that "just by calling a chemical mixture either "vomit" or "parmesan cheese" [...] could elicit totally different reactions to the scent—disgust or pleasure" (Herz [2012], 55). This confirms plenty of more informal observations one can make in one's everyday experience, and also found in two classics of disgust research like Rozin and Fallon [1987] and Angyal [1941]. In all these observations, it is beliefs, or imaginings etc., about the nature of the substance smelled (or tasted, seen etc.) that determines the agreeableness of the smell, and not vice versa. Of course, the unpleasantness of something's sensory quality can at times be a contributing, or even deciding, factor in determining someone's disgust for that something. Some children's dislike for broccoli can turn into disgust. But, once this happens, it ceases to be dislike or distaste, and acquires the characteristics of disgust (including ideational character and contamination sensitivity).[36]

8. Against this view, Royzman *et al.* argue that disgust is not as cognitively

[34] Cf. Rozin and Fallon [1987].

[35] I do not refer here to Tomkins [2008]'s "dissmell", one of his nine biologically based affects; another one is disgust. Words or expressions for concepts such as the above already exist, of course: 'stink', 'stench', 'noise', 'cacophony'. Cf. also later on in this chapter, and especially Chapter 3 for more on the 'senses of disgust'.

[36] Cf. also Chapter 3 for further discussion of these issues.

sophisticated as I have suggested. In fact, as earlier mentioned, disgust is for them not sufficiently cognitive to merit classification as an emotion. The central reason for this is, according to Royzman *et al.*, that disgust fails to achieve a sufficient degree of abstractness in the way in which it (implicitly) characterizes its elicitors.[37] Instead, they suggest, disgust "is a pre-cognitive response to specific images, smells, tastes, sounds, and a host of things associated therewith".[38] On this basis, Royzman *et al.* conclude that disgust belongs to the class of responses that includes sexual drive, nausea and itches—rather than to the class of emotions. By contrast, Royzman *et al.* cite what they consider as central or prototypical cases of emotions, in order to show that emotions achieve the degree of abstractness required.

Although they do not deny that disgust "has an "ideational" edge", Royzman *et al.* argue that disgust elicitors do not disgust in virtue of their "causing a person to believe that a certain *abstract proposition* is true of the world".[39] By contrast, this latter is

> precisely how a shadow on a mammogram produces fear, and how insults produce anger, and how believing your wife is sleeping with another man produces jealousy, and how recognizing that someone has succeeded where you have failed produces envy, and how knowing

[37] Royzman and Sabini [2001] also suggest that disgust does not show sufficient flexibility in its typical set of responses. However, they argue only indirectly for the latter claim, through arguments for the first claim (viz. that disgust lacks abstractness in elicitor characterization). Their underlining train of thought seems to be that the low level of cognitive abstractness naturally accompanies low flexibility in the modulation of the disgust response. In fact, given their argument, the most faithful formulation that Royzman *et al.*'s give of their charge against disgust's emotion status is that disgust does not involve "reasonably *flexible* responses to relatively *abstract*, *generative* classes of eliciting events" (54; their emphases).

[38] Royzman and Sabini [2001], 48.

[39] Royzman and Sabini [2001], 47; authors' own emphasis. In accord with my own assumptions throughout all discussions of disgust's formal object in this chapter, Royzman *et al.* point out that what is important is not beliefs (or perceptions, imaginations etc.) in *every* case of emotion elicitation. Instead, it is sufficient that the emoter have the relevant beliefs (or perceptions, imaginations etc.) in her ontogenesis, or personal history. Force of habit can lead to automatization (or phenomena such as redintegration), but these cases would not count as evidence of the absence of a higher-order formal object for emotions like fear.

> that you jumped off a ship because you thought it was sinking, but it wasn't, produces shame...[40]

So, the bulk of their argument involves showing that disgust does not work like this. In particular, it involves showing the inadequacy of all existing accounts of disgust elicitors as having some common characteristic feature.

They argue against a variety of views, starting from the one endorsed by the first ideational theorist of disgust, Andras Angyal [1941] (who suggests inferiority and meanness as the features characteristic of disgust elicitors), through to Douglas' (which appeals to categorial violation) and others', and ending with Rozin and his colleagues' (reminders of animality, contaminated/contaminating, or threats to the soul). A lot of their examples and arguments against a common feature of disgust elicitors are in fact exemplar, and I share most of their argumentative thrust there. However, I take these arguments to support a difference between disgust and other emotions (e.g. fear, anger etc.) concerning their formal objects.[41] By contrast, I disagree with what Royzman *et al.* take as the conclusion of their arguments, i.e. that disgust elicitation is not primarily ideational.

I will accept that there is no common feature among disgust elicitors *in the same sense* in which there are common features for fear and anger elicitors.[42] However, let me point out, this does not mean that disgust elicitors have no features whatsoever in common. In particular, trivially, disgust elicitors are all (deemed) disgusting. In other words, they all possess the property of *disgustingness*. What they do not have in common is a kind of feature that does

[40] Royzman and Sabini [2001], 47.
[41] See later on.
[42] I will offer further defence of this claim later on in this chapter.

not refer back to the emotion itself, or a non-(entirely-)response-dependent feature. Somewhat misleadingly, Royzman *et al.* refer to this kind of a feature in terms of "abstract propositions". Emotions like fear, they suggest, are elicited by virtue of a "belie[f] that a certain *abstract proposition* is true of the world [...] this is precisely how a shadow on a mammogram produces fear".

As far as I can tell, Royzman *et al.* talk of "abstract propositions" to refer to something like emotions' formal objects or core relational themes. In the mammogram scenario, for instance, Royzman *et al.* seem to have in mind a proposition such as 'That shadow on the mammograph is a (relatively immediate) threat for myself, or for someone I care about (or my significant others)'. This proposition is not obviously "abstract", nor is it impossible for disgust to be elicited in virtue of belief in a proposition (e.g. 'That pile of faeces over there is disgusting'). (Moreover, belief is typically not necessary for emotion elicitation: imagination can also replace the latter in the causal chain.) Imprecisions aside, the (valuable) essence of Royzman *et al.*'s claim seems to be something like the following. Disgust is typically elicited by items possessing disparate features, and only united by their belonging to a relatively fixed list of elicitors. For emotions such as fear, by contrast, elicitors are typically determined in virtue of their (perceived, believed etc.) possession of a higher-order (or "abstract") feature (e.g. *being dangerous*).

However, a statement of the difference between disgust and fear like the latter does not necessarily support a non-ideational or sensory view such as Royzman *et al.*'s. Although not driven by a higher-order formal object, disgust elicitation does not have to be primarily motivated by mere "images, smells, tastes, sounds". Instead, what drives it can be, and is, ideational reasons such as the nature of something or its history of contact.

Nonetheless, disgust is certainly a peculiar response when compared to prototypical emotions like fear and anger, as far as their formal objects are concerned (as I will show further later in this chapter). Moreover, the set of responses in which Royzman *et al.* place disgust contains responses that are not merely sensory: certainly sexual desire and nausea, possibly itches. But then, (taste and) distaste, too, can be construed as more cognitively sophisticated than a merely sensory response (and so can perhaps be hunger, or even pain).[43] Moreover, disgust may not be the only affective response for which a higher-order formal object is not available: love is arguably another one as the recent debate on love's reasons shows.[44] And love would certainly seem to be a central case of emotion. Finally, there are features of the disgust response (most prominently, contamination sensitivity), that, in addition to its ideational character, militate in favour of acknowledging in it the involvement of a significantly high level of cognition.[45]

Ultimately, whether or not disgust merits being labelled an "emotion" is an issue that bears only a moderate relevance for my purposes in this thesis. What I am only interested in showing is what features disgust has as a psychological phenomenon (e.g. ideational character, contamination sensitivity). Nonetheless, in what follows I will continue to consider disgust as an emotion. Perhaps disgust is not a prototypical case of emotion, but not all emotions are anyway.

9. So, disgust is primarily an ideational emotion. But in virtue of what is one type of thing classified as disgusting, and another is not? One answer is: mostly culture. This happens primarily through parental and broader soci-

[43] For taste, cf. for instance Korsmeyer [1999].
[44] Ronald de Sousa put forward a theory of this kind in "Reasons for Love", at a conference in honour of Peter Goldie, held at the University of Manchester in 2012; cf. also de Sousa [forthcoming].
[45] Cf. above, as well as below, for more on contamination sensitivity.

etal example in the early phases of acquisition of disgust.[46] Afterwards, our individual list of disgust elicitors changes to some extent (through the addition and removal of items on the list) via association, inference, habituation, psychological conditions, and other essentially cultural mechanisms.

Valerie Curtis *et al.* [2011] categorize the learning routes of disgust in three classes: Garcia effect, evaluative conditioning and the law of contamination. The Garcia effect is the phenomenon for which whatever is perceived as having caused an instance of illness in one thereafter becomes an object of aversion for one. The phenomenon is common to many animal species and was first studied in rats.[47] However, the aversion developed as part of the Garcia effect is better seen as an instance of proto-disgust, as it does not involve contamination ideation.[48] [49]

Instead, evaluative conditioning is likely the source of the great majority of our disgust elicitors, in particular through the expressions of disgust or recommendations of our parents or tutors (especially those to which we are exposed during a relatively early developmental window). The so-called "law of contamination", also an important learning route for disgust, is the mechanism for which something elicits disgust in virtue of its being (perceived etc. as) contaminated by another disgust elicitor. Unlike the disgust attributable to evaluative conditioning, however, the disgust elicited in virtue of the law of contamination is limited to the contaminated token and can be reversed (e.g.

[46] The evidence is that one's disgust sensitivity (i.e. the extent to which one is disgusted by common disgust elicitors, as measured through questionnaires) is strongly correlated to one's parents'. Cf. Rozin *et al.* [2000], 647.

[47] See Garcia and Koelling [1955].

[48] Incidentally this is also why what Miller [1998] calls 'disgust of surfeit' is not disgust.

[49] Curtis *et al.* [2011]'s inclusion of the Garcia effect among disgust's learning routes is perhaps also a consequence of Curtis [2013]'s abovementioned (minority) view, according to which the disgust system is not a human peculiarity.

by means of cleansing).[50] [51]

Some researchers go so far as to say that our lists of disgust elicitors are *completely attributable* to culture.[52] Others instead suggest that there is a set of core disgust elicitors (including some of the most common disgust elicitors, i.e. at least some of the following: faeces, decaying substances, body boundary violations and phenotypic abnormalities) that are "innately specified".[53] However, given the evidence on feral children mentioned earlier, it would be difficult to accept the thesis that certain core elicitors are innate in the sense of being capable of triggering disgust independently of cultural learning.[54] On the other hand, one cannot ignore the impressive overlap between different people in radically different cultures in the kinds of things that they find disgusting.

The most plausible view is therefore in the middle. This is the view that explains the convergence in types of disgust elicitors in terms of cultural learning constrained by some innate predispositions. These are instances of a more general phenomenon that psychologists call "preparedness" or "belongingness", and which favours the learning of certain (types of) targets or rules and not others.[55] The phenomenon has also been hypothesized for language. In fact, this hypothesis is once more in line with the language analogy introduced earlier. For disgust, it will be easier to, say, learn that bodily excreta are disgusting, than, say, that a flower is.[56] For language, the same reasoning will apply to,

[50] For another way to categorize means of disgust acquisition, see Rozin and McCauley [1999], who lists contamination, generalization and evaluative conditioning.

[51] There are also mechanisms by which one can 'unlearn' disgust, or drop elicitors from one's set. Habituation is likely one key mechanism involved. Research on such mechanisms is however less developed than research on disgust acquisition. There is however research on cognitive-behavioural techniques based on exposure and response prevention. Cf. Olatunji and McKay [2009].

[52] Herz [2012] for example.

[53] Kelly [2011], 50 and 59.

[54] Cf. Rozin *et al.* [2000].

[55] Cf. Seligman [1970] and Rozin and Kalat [1971].

[56] Cf. Rozin *et al.* [2000].

say, a particular rule of sentence construction rather than another.

One consequence of the abovementioned considerations is that *disgustingness* is a response-dependent property of disgust elicitors. Rather than being an objective property of elicitors, in other words, disgustingness makes sense only insofar as the response of disgust exists. This is an inevitable consequence of the mechanisms of disgust acquisition described earlier.

10. Nonetheless, Colin McGinn has recently challenged this conclusion and argued that disgustingness is in fact an objective property. He says:

> Disgustingness, I contend, is an objective property, not a subjective or relative property. Humans find feces disgusting and crystals non-disgusting; but suppose that Martians invert this pattern of response—feces are lovely for them, while crystals bring nausea and the other symptoms of disgust. [...] Do Martians speak the truth when they say, "Crystals are disgusting, but feces are not," [...] I think that intuitively this is quite wrong—there is really nothing at all disgusting about crystals![57]

In this passage, a role of preminence is played by 'intuitively'. In effect, McGinn supports his contention by mere appeal to his intuitions. Against the ample collection of evidence of which I have provided an outline above, however, pretheoretic intuitions bear little weight.

But later on in his study on disgust, McGinn advances what he labels a "death-in-life" theory of the emotion. Among other things, this theory is predictably meant to characterize the objective property of *disgustingness*. On the

[57] McGinn [2011], 61.

theory, what disgusts us is "death *as presented in the form of living tissue*".[58] But not just any life and death: it is "death-in-life" as the notions of life and death "*apply to a conscious being*".[59] Unfortunately, this is pretty much as precise a general outline of McGinn's theory as it is possible to provide. In order to challenge McGinn, it is more useful to look at his account of disgustingness for specific disgust elicitors.

Consider the disgust elicitor that McGinn contrasts to crystals in the passage quoted above: faeces. The case of faeces and what I will say about it are also representative of the type of dialectic in which McGinn engages, as well as of its flaws. According to the death-in-life theory, faeces are (objectively) disgusting because, McGinn says, "life and death exist co-presently in" them.[60] There is death in them because they are the end product of digestion: "the digestive process takes living things as input and delivers dead things as output [...] the rectum is a grave".[61] But there is also life in them, insofar as digestion, of which they are a part, is a living process and "the very foundation of all animal life".[62] Moreover, faeces are organic matter (life) but seem inanimate (death).

McGinn's characterization of faeces may be thought-provoking as a cultural analysis of (Western) perceptions of bodily excreta. It is not however a credible account of the objective property of disgustingness. This is a property that, as McGinn had claimed earlier, ought to make faeces disgusting to Martians, if only they had a true understanding of them. As McGinn presents it, it is instead a culturally constructed property if there is one. McGinn's reasons for

[58] McGinn [2011], 89–90.
[59] McGinn [2011], 94.
[60] McGinn [2011], 102.
[61] McGinn [2011], 101.
[62] McGinn [2011], 102.

faeces' being at the same time dead and alive are essentially *metaphorical*—and in fact involve several different metaphors, too. Faeces are dead *qua* end product of digestion (end-as-death); or they are dead as they do not move (death-as-immobility). By contrast, they are alive because they take part in life (metonymy), but also because they are organic matter (possibly the only literal statement, or in another sense metonymical).

Nothing however seems to dictate which metaphor is appropriate to use, not even McGinn's specification that life and death are notions to consider "as they apply to a conscious being".[63] Faeces are not, literally and under the same respect, both dead and alive. They are so metaphorically, and under different metaphors. What if I only consider faeces as dead because I only consider the end-of-digestion as the right metaphor under which to frame them? Will I then not be disgusted by faeces? Will I be mistaken about their nature? The dependence of disgustingness on the correctness of the choice between several metaphors renders disgustingness eminently culturally and subject-relative.

But perhaps, for McGinn, the necessary and sufficient condition for something's being objectively disgusting is the mere *possibility* of finding at least two metaphorical senses in which something is both dead and alive. But then one can find a metaphor for almost everything. Some crystals can for example be dead *qua* inanimate objects, as well as alive (insofar as they aid life) *qua* medicines (for instance, pennicilin and acetylsalicylic acid are both crystals). To conclude, McGinn's theory is highly implausible in the light of the empirical evidence available, as well as unable, even by its own standards, to provide an objective account of disgustingness.

[63] McGinn [2011], 94.

11. I have so far argued for two main theses. First, the emotion of disgust is universal and innate in humans. Secondly, disgust's elicitors are fixed through cultural learning constrained by innate preparedness. These are two main features of disgust. What they contribute to bringing about is, as a matter of fact, an impressive convergence in types of disgust elicitors (e.g. food, animals and, more generally, organic substances) and sometimes in specific substances (e.g. faeces and bodily excreta and secreta), but also significant cross-cultural and -individual variability.

I have also described a third and fourth feature of disgust. I have suggested that disgust has two further (a third and a fourth) features: ideational character and contamination sensitivity. These two features play an important role in distinguishing disgust from distaste. But ideational character and contamination sensitivity have further significance. At its core, disgust involves revulsion at the prospect of physical contact with a disgust elicitor (broadly construed as to include what is contaminated by a disgust elicitor *stricto sensu*). This makes it, in a sense to be explained, predominantly oriented towards objects, as opposed to situations (a fifth main feature of disgust). Let me explain.

Emotional states have intentional objects.[64] I fear the impact that inflation will have on my savings, or the tiger walking towards me; you are angry at the burglar for stealing your comic books collection; Roman Catholics are sad because of the Pope's renouncing his papacy. The intentional objects of these emotional episodes are, respectively: inflation's impacting my savings, the tiger's walking towards me, the burglar's stealing your comic books, and the Pope's renouncing the papacy.

[64] In fact, affective states which do not are usually considered as belonging to the category of "moods"; cf. de Sousa [2013] (accessed on 20/4/2013).

Moreover, some of these emotional states have "targets": inflation, the tiger, and the burglar. The last one cannot be said to have a target, without some stretching of intuitions.[65] The reason is that sadness is not blaming; one can be sad *about something*, not *at someone*.[66]

Note how, in all of the examples considered, targets are objects (in a somewhat narrow sense, but including people) and intentional objects are situations (i.e. events or processes).[67] Indeed, this is more often the case with fear, anger, sadness, and with several other emotions. Disgust is relatively unusual in this respect. At least *prima facie*, the intentional object of disgust in fact coincides with its target, and both are objects. For example, the pile of faeces that I see would seem to be both the target and the intentional object of my disgust. However, whether things in this respect are indeed as they appear is not straightforward. In fact, I will argue, appearances are to an extent deceptive but provide an important insight into the workings of disgust.

An important reason to reject the thesis that disgust's intentional objects are objects (in a narrow sense) lies in disgust's sensitivity to proximity. The same disgusting object typically triggers more or less disgust according to a directly proportional relation to one's proximity to it. This supports a characterization of disgust's intentional object that includes reference to the presence of the object in one's vicinity (or its power to affect the emoter or her significant others). Moreover, disgust is also sensitive to other kinds of context. For instance, the same person would be disgusted at the prospect of eating a rotten

[65] Cf. de Sousa [2013] (accessed on 20/4/2013).

[66] One could be sad that something or someone exists, but that would just mean that one is sad *about this thing or person's existence*.

[67] Here and in what follows, 'object' and 'situation' should not be understood in any kind of heavy metaphysical sense. For this reason, perhaps other expressions might do a better job at avoiding marginal counterexamples: for instance, 'local' and 'global' (I am indebted to Paul Noordhof for this suggestion). However, I prefer 'object' and 'situation' for their greater intuitiveness.

grape, even though they will pluck it up with much less or even no disgust. The type of contact makes the difference here. Both proximity/power to affect and type of contact introduce a relational aspect in disgust, thus suggesting that the intentional object of disgust is sometimes situational rather than merely objectual.

I do not deny that faster, more automatic episodes of disgust may be triggered by the simple perception of certain sensory features, without much or any reference to the object they are of, or to the situation in which the latter might be situated. However, automatic emotional appraisals of this kind are not exclusive to disgust but can be, and have been, hypothesized for basic emotions generally, starting with fear.[68] However, emotional episodes of this kind are typically short-lived and quickly lead to more comprehensive emotional awareness.[69]

If disgust is not unlike fear, anger, sadness etc. in having situations as its some-time intentional objects,[70] it nonetheless exhibits a peculiarity in the relationships that typically hold between its targets and its intentional objects. These relationships fall into a very limited set of types. Let me explain. Situations of a wide variety of types can be eliciting intentional objects of emotions like fear, anger, sadness etc. Emotional targets thus figure in a wide variety of relationships with the other elements of these eliciting situations. The tiger (target) is fearsome in its walking towards me in the jungle, but much less so in a glass cage at the zoo. Inflation (target) is scary for the money I have in my

[68] Cf. LeDoux [1998] for famous studies on fear in rats, which are interpreted by Robinson [2005] as suggesting the hypothesis in hand for humans. Cf. also Nussbaum [2001], 114–5 for doubts on the appropriateness of an interpretation of this kind.

[69] Cf. Robinson [2005] for an example of a view of emotions as processes, composed of initial fast appraisals and later stages of "cognitive monitoring".

[70] Not all emotions are like disgust and fear in this: love is likely an emotion whose intentional object is not a situation but an object or person.

bank account, but not at all so if I have debts to repay. By contrast with this variability, disgust elicitation is more often sensitive to targets standing in a limited number of relations. These are mainly relationships between target and experiencer: being present or absent to, closer to, or more distant from them, or in contact with them through the mouth, or the skin, or otherwise. Some further elaborations of these basic patterns of relationships are possible. A slice of cheese may not be disgusting on a plate on the kitchen table at dinnertime, but can become so if seen laying in a litter bin. Here the disgustingness and lack thereof come from the prospect of eating the cheese: acceptable in the former case, disgusting in the latter.[71] Movement of or within the disgusting is a further frequent pattern of development of the aforementioned basic types of contact relationships. Teeming, wriggling worms are typically more disgusting than still ones; so is a spurt of blood when compared to a blood puddle. The reason is probably again the (likelihood of the) prospect of contact: the more mobile something is, the more one is likely to get in contact with it.[72]

The limited number of types of relationships that are relevant for disgust is accompanied by the central importance of objects. Other emotions, e.g. fear, anger etc., can be elicited by, and directed to, situations prominently involving all sorts of objects. One can be scared by knives, people, inflation etc. Disgust is also elicited by a wide variety of things (i.e. those on one's list of disgust elicitors, and, secondarily, by whatever gets in contact with the former), but the kinds these things fall into are arguably more limited in number

[71] Darwin famously has an example of this kind involving droplets of soup on someone's beard; cf. Darwin [1872/1892], 257–258.

[72] Some such cases, paradigmatically those involving spiders or cockroaches, may however be best understood as mixtures of fear and disgust. At least, the respective role in them of the two emotions is difficult to determine. Cf. e.g. Vernon and Berenbaum [2002].

(i.e. mostly concrete and organic kinds of substances). More importantly, the items on one's list of disgust elicitors are generally disgusting no matter what situations they are found into; and, conversely, whenever there is disgust, this is typically traceable to an item on the list (either because it figures prominently in the direct object of disgust or in virtue of a past history of contact with the latter).[73] By contrast, the objects that figure prominently in emotional episodes of fear, anger etc. are much less univocally linked with the emotions of fear, anger etc. A knife is sometimes involved in fear, sometimes in anger, other times it is involved in completely different emotional episodes or is emotionally neutral. What is much more important in fear, anger etc. are the situations or relationships that objects are in.[74]

My suggestion is that the two features of disgust just outlined (limited types of relevant relationships and univocal, one-to-one link with eliciting objects) likely made it the case that disgust could be often elicited by mere recognition (or imagination) of an object, diminishing the relevance of situations in disgust elicitation. This feature of disgust makes it a peculiarly *object-centric* emotion (as opposed to situation-centric). This has particularly interesting consequences on its elicitation promptness. In other words, the disgust appraisal mechanism in many cases brackets off the details of the wider situation, and achieves a faster and more immediate response. This can be done effectively because, as suggested, there is a limited number of possible patterns of relationships between the target and other elements of a disgusting situa-

[73] Cases such as rubbish should not be seen as exceptions to this rule. It is true that perfectly non-disgusting objects, a brand-new book for instance, can become disgusting if they are thrown in a rubbish bin. However, rubbish, and the rubbish bin, are themselves objects of disgust, which the brand-new book becomes a part of as soon as it is thrown away (brand-new-book-as-rubbish). Similar considerations apply to spit-inside-the-mouth vs spit-outside-the-mouth, fossil-faeces vs fresher-faeces, and other such cases.

[74] This is a point that can be read, albeit perhaps only partially, in Royzman *et al.*'s reference to "abstract propositions"; cf. discussion earlier on.

tion (including the emoter or the individual potentially affected by the disgust elicitor).[75] Moreover, and as far as the emoter/potentially affected person are concerned, these possible patterns of relationship all revolve around the *possibility of physical contact* between the potentially affected individual and the target/disgust elicitor. The prospect of contact with the disgust target can therefore be assumed *by default* once a disgust elicitor (as a target) is perceived, recognized, or imagined. (The prospect of contact is in fact so integral to disgust that it is integrated into its very response, as its contamination sensitivity shows.)[76]

Naturally, this feature of disgust is likely to have been evolutionarily beneficial. Faster emotional appraisals generally mean more limited voluntary control. For disgust one can come up with good reasons to go for an extra quick appraisal mechanism (in addition to the already high speed of emotion elicitation generally). One such can be found in the benefits of avoiding *any* contact with the potentially pathogenic elicitor. These would more easily be achieved with an emotional reaction that fires at the miminal chance of pathogen presence. The frequency of false positives, or misfirings might have actually been overall advantageous to the fitness of early humans.[77]

Although disgust appraisals of the kind just described centre on objects as targets of disgust, both situational elicitation and further cognitive monitoring are possible, at least to some extent. With such monitoring will come awareness

[75] I make a distinction between emoter and potentially affected individual in order to include the case of what one might call 'empathetic disgust'; cf. Wicker [2003] for evidence indicating mirror-neuron activity in disgust.

[76] My considerations on object- vs situation-centricity are consonant with, and in fact were initially prompted by, Kolnai [1929/2004]'s distinction between disgust's "primary intention", or principal direction, towards "so-being" [*Sosein*] and fear's principal direction towards "being" [*Dasein*] (44). Cf. Chapter 3 for further comments on the issue.

[77] Cf. also Kelly [2011].

of, for instance, locus of prospective contact (mouth, genitals, hands etc.). This will have as an effect the down- or up-regulation of one's disgust response. However, such cognitive monitoring has limited scope and disgust remains a substantially object-centric emotion.

As I will suggest in Chapter 3, disgust's object-centricity is important, as it accounts for the ease and relative unavoidability/un-attenuability of disgust elicitation in the case of representations of disgust elicitors. In virtue of disgust's object-centricity, in fact, the relationship between the emoter/art appreciator and the disgust elicitor as represented is bypassed in disgust elicitation. As a result, the art appreciator appraises the representation as disgusting, as soon as she recognizes (or imagines) a disgust elicitor in it. The fact that the elicitor is not present but is only represented, or even its complete fictionality if it is realistically rendered, have relatively little importance. More precisely, such circumstances have significantly less importance than they would have in counterpart cases involving fear, anger or sadness.

Notice that absence from an appreciator, or inexistence of an actual disgust elicitor object does not mean lack of a necessary condition for object-centric disgust. The fact that strictly speaking there is no object (e.g. there are no faeces in a colour photograph of faeces) does not in other words impede object-centricity or disgust elicitation. Emotions generally are elicited in the absence of direct perception or belief, as even cognitive theorists of emotion usually admit these days. Moreover, emotions are to a significant extent cognitively impenetrable. These are characteristics of emotions generally, especially of basic emotions. One central likely evolutionary benefit of emotion systems is that they allow faster, even if less accurate and sometimes unreliable, reactions than more rational systems do. In this respect, disgust is not peculiar or different

relative to other emotions. Aside from what pertains to object-centricity, general immediacy and stubbornness of elicitation are not exclusive features of disgust. Fear has them, too, as well as other emotions.

Consider for instance the fear that one feels while standing on a glass floor, on top of a montainous precipice. The greatest amount of (scientific) faith in the solidity of the glass floor structure will generally not be enough to prevent one from feeling afraid of falling on the rocks beneath. In this case, the realistic *appearance* of a fearsome situation is enough to trigger fear. The same thing happens with disgust at a colour photograph of faeces. The *appearance* of a disgusting object is enough to elicit disgust. Disgust's object-centricity vs fear's situation-centricity is a different distinction from the appearance/reality one. Nonetheless, both object-centricity and the sufficiency of appearance both contribute to making emotion elicitation faster and more immediate: the former relative to situation-centric emotions, the latter relative to more rational responses.

12. Similar considerations apply to two cases documented by one of Rozin and colleagues' most celebrated experiments. In one case, subjects in great numbers refused with disgust to eat chocolate desserts very realistically shaped as turds, even if fully aware of the decoy. In the second case, many subjects were disgusted by the prospect of drinking juice from a glass in which a completely harmless, sterilized cockroach had been dropped.[78] In these cases, disgust elicitation is especially immediate and stubborn in virtue of the combined effect

[78] See Rozin *et al.* [1986a].

of object-centricity and (realistic) appearance.[79] [80]

Rozin *et al.* present the phenomenon exemplified in the two cases described as an instance of the "law of similarity", according to which "the image equals the object".[81] On this account, the law of similarity is one of two "laws of sympathetic magic", which are suggested to be peculiar to disgust; the other is the law of contagion, or sensitivity to contamination.

However, these two "laws" have in my view a somewhat different status. As earlier suggested, contamination sensitivity is a central and distinctive aspect of the disgust response. It is quite a sophisticated cognitive mechanism that likely played an evolutionarily crucial role in protecting humans from pathogens. It effectively embodies what Steven Pinker has called "intuitive microbiology".[82] By contrast, the so-called "law of similarity" is not a peculiarity of disgust, but of emotions more generally (although it may be more obvious in the case of disgust given the additional rule played by object-centricity).

13. I have reviewed five main features of disgust (among others): universality of the disgust system in humans, cultural learning and innate preparedness in disgust acquisition, and three features of the disgust response, i.e. ideational character, contamination sensitivity and object-centricity. A sixth important feature of disgust concerns its formal object. As suggested, emotions have intentional objects and can also have targets. In addition, emotions are (standardly understood as being) elicited by, or can be seen as attributing to their

[79] Notice that the first case is not only similar to, but an actual instance of the representational case discussed in the previous paragraph. The chocolate turds in question are effectively tridimensional representations.

[80] Royzman and Sabini [2001], 48–9, take instead these cases as evidence of the sensory character of disgust elicitation. But this is unwarranted, as they can be accounted for by appeal to object-centricity and sufficiency of appearance. This latter account has the virtue of preserving the evidence earlier presented in favour of disgust's ideationality.

[81] Rozin *et al.* [1986a], 703.

[82] See Pinker [1997], 383.

intentional objects, a particular (kind of) property. Such a property is usually called "formal object".[83] The formal object of fear is usually characterized as something that is immediately dangerous or *threatening* for the emoter or those significant to her or that she cares about: e.g. inflation's impacting my savings is threatening my welfare, and the tiger's walking towards me may be threatening my life. Anger's formal object instead involves the *thwarting* of the emoter's desires or expectations, or those of her significant others: e.g. the burglar thwarts my desire to keep my comics. The objects of sadness are instead characterized by their *going against* the emoter/her significant other's wishes, like for instance the beloved Pope's leaving the Roman Church without a leader. By contrast, the case of disgust is peculiar in that its formal object, if it can be specified, is quite dissimilar from the formal objects that can be specified for emotions such as fear, anger, or sadness. This shows disgust's sixth feature: its unconsciousness of purpose.

The things that elicit disgust seem in effect impossible to group under a common and non-circular label like the ones that are available for other emotions ("threatening", "thwarting expectations" etc.). I have already hinted at this issue above, in my earlier discussion of Royzman and Sabini [2001]'s suggestion that the absence of a higher-order formal object bars disgust from deserving emotion status. Things possessing very different characteristics commonly elicit disgust across subjects, and even in the same subject—even if one leaves aside those things that become disgusting merely in virtue of a past history of contact with items on one's list of disgust elicitors. As Daniel Kelly [2011]

[83] The expression is of Medieval origins but was used in the contemporary sense by Anthony Kenny [1963/2003]. An expression that some use with more or less the same meaning is "core relational theme"; cf. Lazarus [1991] and Prinz [2004].

puts it, it is "highly implausible" that "disgust elicitors all share some property above and beyond triggering disgust".[84] [85] All of the attempts made to find a necessary and sufficient condition for being a disgust elicitor have been either unsuccessful or unsatisfactory.

A property such as *being organic* is common to many disgust elicitors, although in certain circumstances disgust might be triggered by a non-organic elicitor.[86] Moreover, even if organicalness were a necessary condition, it would certainly not be sufficient. Each of us is not in fact disgusted by many organic substances (e.g. people, vegetables, food etc.).

Another attempt is associated with Douglas [1966/2003]'s already mentioned link between disgust and "matter out of place". I have already argued that this is a non-starter in the search for the elusive necessary and sufficient property. Kolnai [1929/2004] suggestively talks of a "surplus of life" as the unifying property of disgust, although he does so in the context of a phenomenological analysis. More recently, McGinn [2011] has advanced a defence of a Kolnai-inspired view of disgust. McGinn identifies the necessary and sufficient property of disgust elicitors in "death *as presented in the form of living tissue*". Again, this is clearly unsuccessful for reasons I have discussed above.

Evolutionary accounts are not the answer here, either. Evolution certainly has a say, via preparedness, in which things we find disgusting and which ones

[84] Kelly [2011], 27.

[85] Pole [1983], 245, appears to make a similar point: "Disgust seems to stand apart from other sorts of feeling, emotion, etc. [...] It seems to be connected with fear and hatred; but those emotions have each their 'proper objects', namely things seen as dangerous or hurtful, and accordingly to be avoided or destroyed. Disgusting things need not be noxious—apart from the mere fact of our finding them disgusting.

[86] An acquaintance of mine once confessed to me that he was having trouble finding a roommate given his vegetarianism. Not only was he grossed out by having around in the house a lot of the things that a non-vegetarian flatmate might eat; he could not even stand the sight of Colgate toothpaste on the bathroom shelf. He explained his disgust appealing to a likely association between the toothpaste tube and the animal mistreatments involved in toothpaste research and development.

we do not. Yet a characterization of the formal object of disgust as *being whatever we are prepared to find disgusting* would neither provide a necessary nor a sufficient indication of what disgusts. As earlier illustrated, each of us can be disgusted by some, though not necessarily all, of the things we have a preparedness to be disgusted by, as well as by things for which such preparedness is absent. A further problem for the evolutionary approach is the complete absence of conscious access of the subject emoter to the workings of preparedness. This feature alone would make disgust strikingly different from most other emotions, whose formal objects are, at least in many instances, accessible to consciousness (e.g. fear, anger, joy etc.).

Another possible account of the formal object of disgust involves the notion of *contamination*. Alexandra Plakias [2012], for instance, uses a characterization of the disgusting as what is "contaminated and contaminating".[87] Such an account has *prima facie* appealing features. It refers to a key feature of disgust, but not so directly as to raise immediate worries of circularity. Further, the double reference, to active and passive contamination ("contaminated and contaminating"), covers the two main kinds of disgust elicitors: those which are disgusting in virtue of their nature (contaminating) and those which are disgusting in virtue of their history of contact with elicitors of the former kind (contaminated).

On closer inspection, the merits of such an account are however very limited. The conjunction between 'contaminated' and 'contaminating' is the most

[87] Plakias [2012], 2. Royzman and Sabini [2001] attribute this view to Rozin and his colleagues and he cites a personal communication from Jonathan Haidt that puts this explicitly: "the abstract proposition for core disgust [...] is: I am threatened by contamination,...just as [the abstract proposition] for fear is: I am threatened by harm" (Royzman and Sabini [2001], 48). I am sceptical that Rozin himself has this view in mind. As I have already suggested, contamination is a central notion in disgust, but as part of the disgust response—not as disgust's formal object; cf. also below.

obvious problem. Elicitors that are so in virtue of what they are, rather than in virtue of what they have been in contact with, can hardly be labelled 'contaminated'. Of course, one could suggest a figurative sense of 'contaminated', according to which something is contaminated, without ever actually, *literally* been contaminated by anything. This is not too unlike the case of people who are not superstitious, who nonetheless say of a house that it is "cursed"—even though they do not actually, literally believe curses have the supernatural power they are traditionally purported to have. A figurative sense of 'contaminated' would however be too vague to be completely satisfactory as part of an emotion's formal object. A disjunction will however solve this problem easily: "contaminated or contaminating".

However, a more difficult problem is posed by the broad semantic range of applicability of the concept of *contamination*. To contaminate is simply to pass on something, typically something noxious or otherwise negative. Even discarding as figurative or extended uses in which what is passed on is positive, the notion of contamination still includes a wide variety of kinds of things transmitted and of means of transmission. Even modifying Plakias's characterization further and restricting the type of contamination and means of transmission to something like biological contamination and to physical contact, there still are counterexamples, especially on the sufficiency side. There are things that, although clearly contaminating if touched, many would still not find disgusting. For instance, I would not necessarily be disgusted by an acquaintance, who I knew had given me the flu virus. Moreover, many would not find disgusting an amount of (what they knew to be) dangerous bacteria, say *Acinetobacter*

baumannii,[88] in a petri dish.[89]

On the necessity side, there are things which one can be disgusted by, but which one can (be said to) believe they are contaminating only in a loose and obscure sense (e.g. I am disgusted by cheese and feel contaminated if I touch it, even though I know not quite in what sense). Also, Royzman and Sabini [2001] mention in this sense Rozin and colleagues' cockroach-in-the-juice and chocolate-as-turds experiments. These can be construed as cases in which one knows there are no prospects of physical contamination, but is disgusted nonetheless. All such counterexamples cannot however rule out the association, however inchoate and inappropriate, between disgust and contamination. As earlier suggested, in fact, contamination sensitivity is a central part of the disgust response. Nonetheless, contamination is not the notion to use for the elusive characterization of a non-circular formal object for disgust, because, firstly, it does not provide a sufficient condition for disgustingness. And secondly, its merely featuring in a characterization of disgust's formal object as a part of the disgust response would not satisfy the *non-circularity* condition, since it would refer back to disgustingness.

A similar verdict is appropriate to a characterization of the formal object of disgust which adopts the formal object of fear. On this option, disgust really is a particular type of fear. As a consequence, disgust is directed at (a subset of) what is *threatening*. A view of this kind is implied by Rachel Herz [2012], according to whom disgust is a "special type of fear that evolved to help us evade

[88] One of six most pathogenic germs identified by the Infectious Diseases Society of America in 2006; see <www.forbes.com/2006/03/01/antibiotics-pfizer-cubist-cx_mh_0301badbugs.html>.

[89] In fact, the list of contaminating things that are commonly not disgusting can arguably go on much further: as Royzman and Sabini [2001], 49 suggest, in it are "[b]its of radioactive matter, industrial poisons, compressed biological waste, toxins-rich flora, etc.".

a slow and uncertain death by disease".[90] The difference between the two emotions, according to Herz, lies primarily in the type of danger they defend us from (instant harm or slow-burning disease) and hence in their respective elicitors (we "are disgusted by oozing scabs, but we fear tigers").[91] The difference in types of danger/elicitors is associated with differences in automaticity (high for fear, low for disgust), flexibility (instinctive vs learned), speed of on- and offset (fast and furious vs gradual) and cognitive sophistication (low vs high).[92]

Much as with contamination, the notion of threat involved here captures something proper to disgust, even though only in a vague sense. On the one hand, there certainly is a sense in which we perceive disgusting objects as threatening. Insofar as the disgust response involves aversion to contact and contamination worries, the disgusting is threatening. But what is this threat more precisely? Herz suggests slow-burning diseases as the specific threat at issue in disgust. Following Kelly [2011], one might instead say poisons and parasites. But, however one specifies the threat from which disgust is likely to have been beneficial in defending us, problems remain. As some of the examples brought forward above show, there are poisonous and pathogenic substances that are commonly not disgusting. Moreover, and again, appeal to evolutionary benefits does not help much with the formulation of a formal object of the kind that is available for emotions such as fear.

Surely, though, a vague and inchoate sense of a threat does accompany disgust as part of the disgust response. But, for similar reasons to those suggested

[90] Herz [2012], 79. Herz later goes on to suggest that disgust "evolved uniquely in humans from the emotion of fear" (82). Although the exclusivity of disgust to humans is not an implausible suggestion (cf. above), its evolution from fear is a much less plausible (if at all meaningful) contention.

[91] Herz [2012], 79.

[92] Cf. also Kelly [2011], who suggests a similarity between fear and disgust in their involving aversion: in the case of disgust, "to nonpredatory animals whose threat to humans takes a less direct form than brute bodily harm" (51).

in the case of contamination, this circumstance is not helpful in the search for a non-circular characterization of disgust's formal object.[93]

14. The difficulty of finding non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions for disgustingness can be overcome by giving up on *non-circularity*. The formal object of disgust would then be the very property of *disgustingness*. It is an interesting and controversial question whether one should characterize an emotion's formal object in terms of the emotion itself. Ronald de Sousa [2013], for instance, suggests that one should. He says:

> The formal object associated with a given emotion is essential to the definition of that particular emotion. This explains *the appearance of tautology in the specification of any formal object (I am disgusted because it is disgusting);* but it is also, in part, what allows us to speak of emotions being appropriate or inappropriate. If the dog obstructing my path is a shitzu, my fear is mistaken: the target of my fear fails to fit fear's formal object.[94]

Note, however, how, in the passage quoted, de Sousa uses the example of disgust to suggest the "appearance of tautology", only to then attempt to dissolve it by using fear and the case of a proverbially *non-threatening* dog.

On the other hand, in introducing the notion of *formal object* to the philosophical study of emotions, Anthony Kenny [1963/2003] also specifies that: "A formal object should not be confused with an internal accusative, such as occurs in the expression "to dream a dream", "to play a game"."[95] In the same

[93] Cf. Royzman and Sabini [2001] for criticisms of further attempts at the formulation of necessary and sufficient conditions for being disgusting.
[94] de Sousa [2013] (accessed on 20/4/2013); my emphasis.
[95] Kenny [1963/2003], 190.

vein, Julien A. Deonna and Fabrice Teroni [2012] write:

> Note, however, the following crucial fact. If the idea that emotions evaluate in ways that are subject to standards of correctness and justification is to play any substantive role, the apprehension of a given value and the actual exemplification of this value must be to some extent independent from one another. The evaluative properties of the objects in the world cannot be, so to speak, merely in the eye of the beholder. When diagnosing Mary's anger as justified but incorrect, for example, we have presumed the truth of a quite substantial claim: that a joke can be offensive independently of the fact that Mary responds to it with anger. And this assumption would prove wrong-headed if, as some forms of subjectivism about evaluative properties have it, the offensiveness of a joke was existentially dependent on such a response. More generally, if talk of correctness and justification is to have any bite in relation to the connections between emotions and evaluative properties, then it must be possible for an emotion to occur in the absence of any exemplification of the corresponding evaluative property and, conversely, an evaluative property may be exemplified in the absence of the corresponding emotion.[96]

In other words, appropriateness conditions cannot be meaningfully formulated if an emotion's formal object is characterized in a circular way by referring back to the emotion itself.

There are (at least) two issues here that need some unpacking. If a formal

[96] Deonna and Teroni [2012], 41.

object's purpose is to figure prominently in the definition of an emotion, then the formal object can certainly refer back to the emotion (e.g. *being disgusting* will be a perfectly fine formal object for disgust). The disgust response has a number of features, mentioned in this chapter so far, that are certainly sufficient to make it distinctive, and hence enable a serviceable definition of disgust.

For instance, Darwin wrote that disgust "refers to something revolting, primarily in relation to the sense of taste, as actually perceived or vividly imagined; and secondarily to anything which causes a similar feeling, through the sense of smell, touch, and even of eyesight".[97] Tybur *et al.* [2012] condemn Darwin's remarks as a "circular [...] definition" of disgust, since in it disgust is "both the reason for the response (the object is revolting) and the output of the response".[98] Tybur *et al.*'s criticism is woefully unfair to Darwin, however. First of all, Darwin's short sentence quoted above (which is actually a longer version of the sentence quoted by Tybur *et al.*) does not explicitly aim to be a definition of disgust. Darwin in fact says that disgust "refers to something revolting etc.", not, as Tybur *et al.* represent him as saying, that disgust is "a reaction to "something revolting etc."".[99] Moreover, Darwin's short sentence is only the beginning of his eight-page-long description and analysis of the phenomenological, expressive and behavioural features of the disgust response.

Instead, what Darwin in effect attempts in his discussion of disgust is the perfectly sound endeavour of defining disgust on the basis of distinctive features

[97] Darwin [1872/1892], 254.

[98] Tybur *et al.* [2012], 2–3. In alternative to Darwin's and others' definitions, Tybur *et al.* stress the importance of evolutionary considerations concerning the structure and function of the disgust system. Cf. also below.

[99] Tybur *et al.* [2012], 2–3. Here is Darwin's sentence in its wider context: "Scorn and disdain can hardly be distinguished from contempt, excepting that they imply a rather more angry frame of mind. Nor can they be clearly distinguished from the feelings discussed in the last chapter under the terms of sneering and defiance. Disgust is a sensation rather more distinct in its nature, and refers to something revolting" etc. (Darwin [1872/1892], 254).

of the disgust response. Although the details of Darwin's definition may no longer be accurate, the endeavour is one that can be meaningfully pursued today (and informs my discussion in this chapter so far), without incurring contradiction or vicious circularity. If one wants to use a circular formal object characterization for such a definitional endeavour, then that will be fine.

If, instead, one wants disgust's formal object to help with formulating appropriateness conditions for the emotion, then, as Deonna and Teroni [2012] correctly point out, a circular formal object will not do. As shown, however, a non-circular set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a disgust elicitor proves to be an elusive target. So, characterizing a non-circular formal object for disgust proves to be a difficult achievement. In fact, there is no non-circular formal object for disgust that is comparable to those that can be formulated for emotions such as fear, anger and sadness. For lack of a better phrase, I call this feature of disgust 'disgust's unconsciousness of purpose'. I use this phrase to highlight one aspect of the peculiarity of disgust vis-à-vis its formal object, i.e. the frequent absence of internal, direct awareness, on the part of emoters, of the reasons or purposes in virtue of which their list of disgust elicitors includes certain things and not others (excluded here are those things which are "contaminated" through contact with items on one's list of disgust elicitors). Such reasons and purposes might have a role, evolutionarily, in the genetical constraints and cultural learning that jointly produce the human disgust response. Moreover, an emoter may occasionally come to an external, or indirect awareness of such reasons and purposes. They can do so by, for instance, guessing/reconstructing the evaluative conditioning route through which they acquired one or another disgust elicitor, or maybe even by

scientific or pre-scientific reflection on the set of things that disgust.[100] What matters is that what emoters will be aware of internally in many circumstances will merely be that the particular disgust elicitor is best avoided, not touched etc., i.e. that it warrants the set of responses proper to disgust.[101]

One consequence of disgust's unconsciousness of purpose is that appropriateness conditions of the kind that are available for emotions such as fear are unavailable for disgust. This should be in accord with common intuitions. Whereas it makes sense to judge fear of a harmless dog inappropriate, it makes much less sense to talk of an analogous sense of inappropriateness for disgust. I am disgusted by cheese, yet you find it delicious; you are disgusted by mushrooms, but I eat them with relish and like to smell them, too. Neither of us can however think the other's disgust inappropriate, at least not to the same extent as this can be done for emotions like fear. I can find your disgust for mushrooms *unusual* and a good pretext for a joke. But I hardly have reasons to judge it *inappropriate* or *irrational*, at least in the sense in, and to the extent to, which this judgement can be made in the case of someone's fear for the proverbial harmless dog. Firstly, fear of small dogs would seem sufficiently rare in the population, whereas the relevant counterpart cases of disgust (e.g. cheese, yogurt, broccoli etc.) are not. This is not to deny that some kinds of things are really rarely disgusting: e.g. crystals, trees, the moon. Innate preparedness does work as a constraint on the kinds of things that we are disgusted by; but it is a significantly looser kind of constraint from the ones that are at work in the case of emotions like fear. Secondly, in the case of fear there is a non-circular formal object in terms of which one can distinguish between

[100] Cf. Pinker [1997]'s "intuitive microbiology" (383).
[101] For the role that disgust's unconsciousness of purpose plays in disgusting art, cf. especially Chapter 6.

what should be appropriate and what is instead the case; instead, as argued, this is an option with disgust. Compare, for example, "I know it is a perfectly harmless dog, but it frightens me to stand close to it" to "I know mushrooms are not disgusting, but they disgust me".

The peculiar position of disgust with respect to appropriateness conditions naturally manifests itself in a distinct difficulty in articulating one's reasons for disgust in a disagreement. When two parties disagree over whether something is or is not disgusting, it is especially hard for either party to come up with reasons to persuade the other party. In such cases, in fact, it is often hard for each party to see *for themselves* the reasons that justify their own responses. The only thing that one often seems to be able to say in order to justify one's disgust is merely that its object is disgusting. In some cases one can come up with reasons for their disgust: e.g. the elicitor is a pathogen, lots of people find it disgusting, it resembles or reminds of some other disgust elicitor. And sometimes such reasons work to make oneself or the person with whom one disagrees less puzzled or surprised at one's disgust. Nonetheless, some such reasons do not necessarily support a judgement of appropriateness, as much as one of, say, usualness. Moreover, they are typically not sufficient to motivate someone to thereby judge their own or someone else's disgust in the relevant cases in/appropriate (or ir/rational), or at least do not do so nearly as much as in emotions like fear.

15. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which appropriateness conditions for disgust can be obtained—although a very different one from that at issue in the case of emotions like fear. It does make some sense to talk of individual, or subjective inappropriateness conditions, and again only within a given context or moment in a subject's life. Since an emoter's disgust is elicited by her own particular

set of disgust elicitors (determined by her own ontogenetic history) and by whatever she perceives (or believes, imagines etc.) has a history of contact with those elicitors, it makes sense to talk of inappropriateness for her disgust response when this is not triggered accordingly (and of appropriateness when it is). Nonetheless, I have already pointed out, one's set of disgust elicitors can always be modified in the course of one's life. So, in this sense, appropriateness can only be defined relative to a subject's particular moment in life.

Such appropriateness conditions may perhaps play a useful role sometimes. To use a case along the lines of Herz's abovementioned experiment, to be disgusted by a smell that seems to be of vomit will turn out to be inappropriate and leave room for pleasure at the realization that the smell is actually of delicious parmesan cheese. Another role that a subjective and contextual sense of appropriateness may play is in the diagnosis of neuropsychological illness. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) sufferers, at least insofar as so-called washers and their contamination worries are concerned, show a significantly higher disgust sensitivity than normal subjects.[102] Although this difference in itself is merely the signal of a deviation from the statistical norm, it might be construed as representing a difference between the current state of the subject and a hypothetical state of hers without the OCD. In this sense, the excessive firing of the disgust response in OCD sufferers is inappropriate (rather than just unusual), and it signals the presence of an illness. Analogously, Huntington's disease (HD) correlates significantly with disgust sensitivity, but inversely. HD is a genetic, degenerative disease that manifests itself most evidently in the uncoordinated movements exhibited by those suffering from it (their movements

[102] Cf. e.g. Olatunji and McKay [2009] and Panksepp [2007].

resemble a dance, and hence are called 'chorea'). Since the 1990s, research has shown how HD sufferers are much less disgust sensitive than normal subjects, as well as being incapable of recognizing the facial expression of disgust. Here again, in a sense, HD sufferers' disgust sensitivity can be construed as inappropriate, and to some extent contribute to a correct diagnosis of their condition.

16. Even granting the meaningfulness and usefulness of such subjective-contextual appropriateness conditions, the case of disgust is peculiarly different from that of emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness. As such, it has attracted the attention of moral philosophers interested in faultless disagreement or in neo-sentimentalist/fitting-attitude theories of value.[103] In this debate, Knapp [2003] as well as, to some extent, McDowell [1997], offer views that are similar in important respects to the one that I have sketched here. Such views have been criticized, but are, in my opinion, ultimately on the right track. Going into a fuller defence of scepticism about the normativity of disgust would take us too far from the focus of the present thesis. This is for two main reasons. The first is simply that such issues of appropriateness/normativity, in the narrow sense, do not play a decisive role as far as disgusting art is concerned (except insofar as they relate to disgust's unconsciousness of purpose). As mentioned, there is in fact an important degree of convergence towards a set of common disgust elicitors—at least as far as contemporary, and certainly Western, emoters are concerned. The thesis will take advantage of this circumstance and will focus on (relatively uncontroversial) common disgust elicitors.

[103] See McDowell [1997], Wiggins [1997], Blackburn [1998], D'Arms and Jacobson [2000a] and D'Arms and Jacobson [2000b], Knapp [2003], Gert [2005], and Plakias [2012].

17. The second reason why this is not the place to discuss the literature on the normativity of disgust further is that most of it is interested in so-called 'moral disgust'.[104] As stated in the Introduction, the latter falls outside of the remit of discussion of the present thesis. It is a matter of great controversy that of whether moral disgust is in fact the same psychological phenomenon as disgust. In fact, it is fair to say that there is no consensus, or in fact not even a mainstream view (in either the scientific or philosophical communities). An extreme metaphorical view such as the one arguably offered by Bloom [2004] is now generally considered implausible. According to such a view, moral disgust is as much like (physical) disgust as thirst for knowledge is like thirst for water, or lust after a new car is like sexual lust:

> After all, if you actually observe people's faces and actions during heated political or academic discourse, you will witness a lot of anger, even hate, but rarely, if ever, the facial or emotive signs of disgust.[105]

A host of recent experimental evidence makes this view implausible, by pointing to direct engagement in episodes of moral disgust of features characteristic of the disgust response: e.g. facial expressions, physiological markers etc.[106]

However, this still leaves considerable room for disagreement.[107] I do not defend a view on the issue here, but I will point out that a view of (physical) disgust and moral disgust as one and the same psychological phenomenon

[104] In fact, in a lot of the literature, including McDowell [1997] and Knapp [2003], the difference between physical disgust and moral disgust is far from sufficiently taken into account. A better instance in this respect is instead Plakias [2012], which is nonetheless criticizable in other respects; for some such criticisms cf. earlier on in this chapter.
[105] See Bloom [2004], 172–3.
[106] See e.g. Chapman *et al.* [2009] and Danovitch and Bloom [2009].
[107] See also Rozin *et al.* [1986b], Haidt *et al.* [1997], Royzman and Sabini [2001], Nabi [2002], Wheatley and Haidt [2005], Horberg and Cohen [2009], Wheatley and Haidt [2005], Rozin *et al.* [2009], Tybur and Griskevicius [2009] and Tybur *et al.* [2012], and Pizarro *et al.* [2011]; Kass [1997], Nussbaum [2004] and Nussbaum [2010], and Kelly [2011], chapters 4–5.

is as implausible as an extreme metaphorical view. In fact, there are studies that show a greater differential importance of anger verbal expressions over disgust facial expressions in scenarios of moral disgust, than in physical disgust ones. Among other things, this suggests that (physical) disgust is not the only psychological phenomenon at work in moral disgust.[108] Moreover, there is neurological evidence that shows that the areas of the brain involved in judgements of physical as opposed to moral disgust are overlapping to some extent, but also distinct.[109] More importantly, however, it is striking that (physical) contamination worries are not usually present when disgust is directed at moral elicitors. Given the central place that contamination sensitivity has within the emotion of disgust, I wonder how much sense it may have to consider episodes of moral disgust as instances of disgust proper.[110]

One can object to this, as Plakias [2012] and, much earlier, Haidt *et al.* [1997] have, that contamination sensitivity is in fact a feature of the moral disgust response, in the form of *social* contamination, e.g. those who are morally disgusted avoid being socially in contact with the object of their disgust. To support this speculation, Plakias offers evidence of social shunning behaviours, and shows that such evidence conforms to the patterns typical of avoidance behaviour in disgust proper. As it is, however, such evidence does not satisfactorily answer the general question at issue here: viz. is moral disgust genuinely, or only metaphorically proper disgust? No serious participant of this debate denies that part of the moral disgust response follows (metaphorically, or analogically) patterns that are proper to physical disgust. The question is to what

[108] See Gutierrez *et al.* [2012].
[109] See Schaich Borg and Kiehl [2008] and Simpson and Overton [2006]; as cited in Kelly [2011].
[110] Cf. also Royzman and Sabini [2001], 50–4, for more criticisms of the view in hand.

extent the mechanisms involved in one and the other are *the same*.

Although the precise details may yet to be determined, the view that has the best chance of being true is a view like Kelly [2011]'s "Co-opt thesis". On this view, physical disgust is a single, unitary psychological system, which is 'co-opted' by different cognitive systems to work *in conjunction* with them in different domains, such as the moral. In this sense, a study of physical disgust will only to some extent illuminate the functioning of moral disgust.[111]

18. It has been the aim of this chapter to provide an outline of the main features of disgust, with a special focus on those features that are important for disgusting art. Discussion of the latter features will be continued in later chapters, in the context of the analysis of the role of disgust in art. This will start with the next chapter, in which I will focus on the peculiarities of disgust elicitation by means of representation of what is disgusting.

[111] Similar considerations to those offered here might also be offered in the case of other 'variants' of disgust, including perhaps also "artistic" or "aesthetic" disgust, i.e. the reaction of disapproval that one can have to artworks that fall below a minimal standard of quality. This, too, falls outside of the scope of this thesis.

3. Representing Disgust

1. The last chapter discussed the emotion of disgust, and most of that discussion concerned the natural context in which disgust is felt, i.e. in the flesh, or towards real-life, really present disgusting things. However, a very large subclass of artworks is representational or crucially involves representations,[1] and this chapter will focus on disgust elicitation when it comes to *representations*. In particular, what I will study here are the issues of whether, when and how a representation is (or is not) disgusting. In addressing these issues I will concentrate on the central case of representations *of the disgusting*. In the next chapter, I will in contrast discuss the (marginal) cases of disgusting representations of the (typically) non-disgusting, in the context of a survey and categorization of disgusting art. As elsewhere in this thesis, and in order to be as inter-subjective as possible, I aim to restrict myself to the most typical or widely shared disgust elicitors.

2. The issues concerning representation and disgust are importantly connected to a problem, the so-called 'paradox of fiction', that has been widely discussed in contemporary analytic aesthetics. The paradox of fiction, as it is customarily understood, crucially revolves around the following issue. You watch a thriller film, or read a novel with a happy ending, and react to

[1] See next chapter for more on disgust and *non*-representational art.

it by being scared or joyful. But you know that the stories told by the film and by the novel are just fiction. So how are your emotional reactions even possible, given that these stories would seem to be nothing to be afraid of or joyful about? In other words, the paradox of fiction is a puzzle about the *prima facie* evidence that we have emotional responses directed at objects or events that we believe to be merely fictional.[2] The paradox arises from the joint inconsistency of the following three claims:

1. We often have emotions towards objects or situations that we know to be merely fictional;

2. Emotions had towards objects or situations require beliefs in the existence of those objects or situations as possessing certain features;

3. We do not believe in the existence and features of objects or situations known to be fictional.[3]

The general picture that has often emerged from discussions of the paradox of fiction has been that of a single, undivided paradox. For one thing, the paradox has been discussed with regard to various different emotions, but it has often been assumed that the solution proposed for one emotion would generalize to emotions generally. Moreover, partly as a consequence of this,

[2] Rather than on a question of possibility (i.e. how is it possible to be emotional given the fictionality of the supposed objects of emotion), interest in the paradox was rekindled in analytic aesthetics by Colin Radford [1975] as a question of rationality (i.e. is it rational to be emotional given the fictionality of the supposed objects of emotion). To this question, Radford answered that it is irrational to behave in the way we usually do when consuming fiction. Some initially engaged with Radford on his original terms, but the debate soon moved on to the question of possibility, on which it has generally remained. In fact, the questions of possibility and rationality are not as different one from the other as it might initially appear, given the sense in which contemporary analytic philosophy of mind customarily understands rationality of emotions. This is in fact usually understood in terms of emotions' adequacy to elicitation conditions. But the vast majority of the proposed answers to the question of possibility have in fact aimed to provide a way in which emotions are in fact adequate to fictional eliciting conditions. Nonetheless, I share the dominant preference of focus on the question of possibility. For a view that understands the two questions as different, see Gaut [2003].

[3] Here I loosely follow Jerrold Levinson [2006]'s formulation, at p. 41.

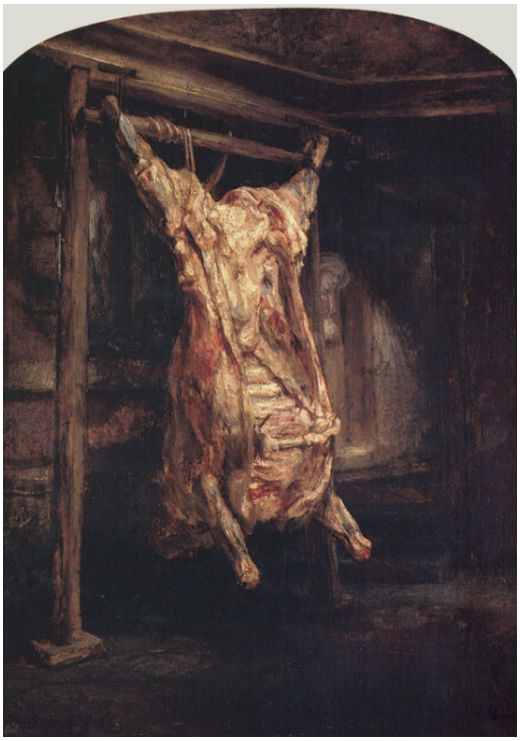
two arguably distinct issues have often been conflated. One issue concerns the difference in emotion elicitation between a real-life, really present elicitor (or one that can potentially affect the prospective emoter or her significant others) and a representation of it: i.e. how is it possible to have emotional reactions towards representations of objects, given that those objects are not really present (or potentially affecting)? The other issue concerns instead the difference between representations of fictional and of non-fictional objects: i.e. how is it possible to have emotional reactions towards represented objects, given that those objects are known or believed not to really exist?

The two issues, at least on the face of it, are not equally important for all emotions. Some emotions are generally more sensitive to their intentional object's presence (or possibility to affect) than to its existence—whether present or not—whilst the reverse is true of others. In the case of other emotions still, the details of the eliciting circumstance are decisive in making existence or presence matter the most. Finally, there are many cases in which the relative importance of existence and presence is a complex issue to settle.

For instance, what motivates the puzzlement over how a spectator can possibly be afraid of something like Kendall Walton [1978]'s cinematic green slime? It would seem like there the important issue is that the green slime is not really present and threatening, rather than the fact that it, and monsters like it, do not exist. A clearer-cut case is that of a film that showed an actual, albeit deceased, psychopathic killer look menacing (say a film about Jack the Ripper). Insofar as spectators feel fear for themselves, it is the presence/representation dichotomy that makes their fear puzzling—not so much the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy.

Similarly, is the subject of Rembrandt's *Carcass of Beef* [1657] a real

carcass of beef or a non-existent one? The answer to this question would not seem to bear much relevance to the disgust response afforded by the painting. More important in this respect would seem to be that the viewer sees the carcass as the subject of a painting, instead of being presented with a real specimen of a carcass (where there is a chance to get in contact with it).



1. Rembrandt, *Carcass of Beef*, 1657

In this sense, disgust is (at least in many cases) more similar to fear than it is to pity. For pity elicitation the actual existence of a pitied object represented would seem, *ceteris paribus*, to matter as much as, if not more than, its immediate (real, rather than represented) presence to the (potential) pitier. Consider for instance Colin Radford [1975]'s made-up harrowing

story.[4] The puzzlement that arises from someone who felt harrowed at it (or at an artistic equivalent of it) is more obviously connected with its "'heroine""s inexistence, not with her absence where and when the story is told.

To repeat, the existence and presence issues are often conflated in the literature. This is not necessarily a problem, so long as one remains aware of the distinction in making the philosophical claims one is interested in making. There is in fact a way in which the two issues can be viewed as part of a single paradox. This involves including *being present* (or *being potentially affecting*) as one of the relevant features of the objects of emotion that figure in claims 1–3. In particular, this means understanding claim 2 and 3 to say, respectively that: (2*) emotions had towards objects or situations require beliefs in the existence of those objects or situations as possessing certain features (including their presence to, and power to affect, members of an audience or their significant others); and (3*) we do not believe in the existence and features (including their presence to, and power to affect, members of an audience or their significant others) of objects or situations known to be fictional (i.e. non-present or powerless to affect).

However, viewing the two issues as part of a single paradox may be misleading. Firstly, it is generally better to *divide* than to unite when the aim is, like here, to remain aware of a distinction. This is especially true in the case at hand given that: (a) the issues of existence and presence are in an asymmetric relationship. Existence is in fact a more general issue than presence: if something is present (or potentially affecting), then it exists, whilst

[4] "[S]uppose that you have a drink with a man who proceeds to tell you a harrowing story about his sister and you are harrowed. After enjoying your reaction he then tells you that he doesn't have a sister, that he has invented the story" (Radford [1975], 68).

the reverse is not true. Addressing one single, two-part paradox of fiction might obscure the distinction between real-life objects that are present and non-fictional representations (i.e. those in which the relevant objects are absent but existent); (b) although there is a sense in which everything that is represented is represented as existing, it is much less obviously true that everything that is represented is represented as *being present* (or *potentially affecting*). So, again, including presence and existence in the same paradox might lead to confusion. Secondly, there is virtue in the *simplicity* of reserving the term 'paradox of fiction' to issues to do with the fiction *genre*. Standardly, the fiction/non-fiction distinction when it comes to artistic genre is merely predicated on the existence of the artwork's subject, and indifferent to its presence to the audience. For these reasons, in what follows, and where appropriate, I will discuss the role of disgust in representation, with respect to, separately, (a) the presence/representation dichotomy, and then, within representations, (b) the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy.

This is however made somewhat arduous by the fact that the most elaborated philosophical discussion of disgust, representation and the paradox of fiction, Carolyn Korsmeyer [2011]'s, is less than crystal clear about the distinction between the presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies.[5] [6] As already suggested, this is not necessarily a flaw,[7] and is a

[5] Carolyn Korsmeyer [2011], esp. 53ff.; but see also Korsmeyer [2012]. In accordance with Korsmeyer's focus, I will only discuss physical disgust, rather than e.g. moral disgust. This is consonant with the focus I have adopted throughout this thesis.

[6] I am aware of only two other discussions of (physical) disgust with respect to the paradox of fiction. One is to be found in Noël Carroll [1990]'s discussion of the paradox of fiction in relation to horror. There Carroll briefly discusses the case of disgust with respect to the paradox of fiction and suggests that it is easily accounted for by thought theory. The same conclusion is reached in a paragraph of Berys Gaut [2003]'s. However, both Carroll's and Gaut's discussions are very succinct, made in passing within a discussion of other issues that are more important to their agendas.

[7] In fact, as will be evident in what follows, Korsmeyer's view remains almost completely coherent even in the absence of a clear distinction between the two dichotomies. The objections to it that I will advance will mostly concern different issues.

feature that Korsmeyer shares with much of the pre-existing literature on the paradox of fiction. By contrast, Korsmeyer's treatment has the merit of avoiding the common assumption that a solution to the paradox of fiction proposed for one emotion generalizes to emotions generally.

In fact, she argues that disgust occupies a radically different place from the emotions standardly considered with respect to the paradox of fiction. According to Korsmeyer, the paradox of fiction is, in the case of disgust, "easily resolved",[8] and "the need to choose among [the solutions standardly required for the paradox] is avoided altogether".[9] Her case for the peculiar place of disgust with respect to the paradox of fiction rests on the truth of what she calls the 'transparency thesis' for disgust. On a rough formulation of this thesis, my emotional reaction of disgust is indifferent to whether it is elicited, on the one hand, say, by a real-life pile of faeces that I see over there (or by a painting of a real-life pile of faeces), or, on the other, by a painted rendering of a pile of faeces before me (or by a painting of a fictional pile of faeces).[10] In other words, representation (fictional or not) is transparent with respect to disgust. The explicit inspiration for this thesis comes to Korsmeyer from a set of remarks made in the eighteenth century by some of the most prominent German-speaking aesthetic theorists, including Moses Mendelssohn, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Immanuel Kant.[11] But Korsmeyer develops the transparency thesis into a theoretically articulated

[8] Korsmeyer [2011], 53.
[9] Korsmeyer [2011], 55.
[10] In Chapter 1 I called this the "indistinguishability claim".
[11] See Chapter 1 for more details on this history; cf. also Winfried Menninghaus [2003], 25ff. From a comparison between what I say in Chapter 1 and in this chapter, there is one fundamental difference between Korsmeyer's view and her historical precedents (one which goes unnoticed by Korsmeyer). Contrary to what Korsmeyer does, Mendelssohn, Lessing and Kant have a much more cognitive view of disgust elicitation, and stress the role that the imagination or the "idea" of the disgusting play in it.

position, in particular by advancing a novel and interesting case for it, as well as by connecting it to the debate on the paradox of fiction.

3. A few clarificatory remarks on what Korsmeyer's transparency thesis amounts to are in order. The first issue that deserves clarification is the nature of the connection between transparency and the paradox of fiction. What the eighteenth-century transparency claims are most obviously about is the presence/representation—as opposed to the fiction/non-fiction—dichotomy. The two dichotomies are not explicitly distinguished one from the other, but the emphasis on the former dichotomy comes across clearly from several passages. For instance, in a passage approvingly quoted by Lessing [1766/1962], Mendelssohn [1760] says that:

> Representations of fear, sadness, horror, pity, and so forth can only prompt displeasure in so far as we take the evil for reality. Hence they can dissolve into pleasurable sensations with the recognition that they are an artful deception. Due to the law of imagination, the repellent sensation of disgust, however, emerges from an idea in the soul alone, whether or not the [causative] object be held for real. What help, then, could it be for the injured mind when the art of imitation betrays itself, be it even in the most flagrant way? Its displeasure did not result from the assumption that the evil is real, but from the latter's mere idea, and this is really present. The sensations of disgust thus are always nature, never imitation.

Many of the expressions used by Mendelssohn in this passage can be interpreted as presupposing either (or both) the presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies: e.g. "we take the evil for reality", "artful deception", "the object be held for real". The decisive sentence, however,

is the following: "What help, then, could it be for the injured mind when the art of imitation betrays itself, be it even in the most flagrant way?". Although difficult on a first reading, Mendelssohn's sentence is really just claiming (via a rhetorical question) that even poor (i.e. non-realistic or simply poorly executed) imitations of the disgusting cannot but elicit disgust.[12] As far as disgust elicitation goes, a poor imitation (in one of the art forms Mendelssohn can have in mind, i.e. painting, sculpture or literature) of the disgusting can only matter as it hinders the impression that its subject is really present—not that its subject is non-fictional. This suggests that Mendelssohn writes with the presence/representation dichotomy in mind.[13]

Even clearer (on this point) is Kant [1790/1978], who prefaces his paragraph-long banning of disgust from the fine arts with this sentence:

> Where fine art evidences its superiority is in the beautiful *descriptions* it gives of things that *in nature* would be ugly or displeasing.[14]

Here, again, the relevant distinction is not between fiction and non-fiction, but between nature, or observed reality, and representation. However, Kant continues:

> One kind of ugliness alone is incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all aesthetic delight, and consequently artistic beauty, namely, that which excites *disgust*.

[12] In a more readable translation the sentence is: "Is the fact that the artistic imitation is ever so recognizable sufficient to reconcile the offended sensibilities?" (Lessing [1766/1962], 126).

[13] Of course, it could be that Mendelssohn sometimes has one, sometimes the other, dichotomy in mind. While this possibility cannot be ruled out, I would still argue that Mendelssohn's passage is most prominently about the presence/representation dichotomy.

[14] Kant [1790/1978], 173; emphases mine.

> For, as in this strange sensation, which depends purely on the imagination, the object is represented as insisting, as it were, upon our enjoying it, while we still set our face against it, the artificial representation of the object is no longer distinguishable from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and so it cannot possibly be regarded as beautiful.[15]

Here what the opposition "artificial representation" vs "nature of the object itself" really amounts to is the presence/representation dichotomy. He clarifies this when, in the passage immediately following, he uses sculpture as a supporting example:

> The art of scuplture, again, since in its products art is almost confused with nature, has excluded from its creations the direct representation of ugly objects...[16]

Sculptures, it seems natural to infer, almost effect the confusion between art and nature insofar as they present tridimensional portrayals of the natural object. Thus being present to a sculpture can be almost like being present to the real thing, instead of a representation of it.

Korsmeyer explicitly aligns herself to this history of remarks, by explicitly endorsing the transparency thesis. At the same time, however, she draws from them a conclusion with respect to the paradox of fiction:

> Although I reject the exclusion of disgust from among the emotions that can be transformed in art into what Kant calls "aesthetic liking", I endorse the claim that it is a relatively transparent emotion.

[15] Kant [1790/1978], 173–4; his emphasis.
[16] Kant [1790/1978], 174.

> That is, when it is rendered artistically, that which is disgusting in nature remains disgusting in art, and for much the same reasons that occasioned censure on the part of the Enlightenment philosophers who were so agitated by the arousal of this emotion. Mimesis *transfers* but does not *transform* the disgusting image in art. While this feature of disgust makes it doubly difficult to explain its objects in terms of positive aesthetic experience, it actually averts one of the standard philosophical problems regarding the nature of emotions aroused in aesthetic contexts. With disgust, what is known as the "paradox of fiction" is easily resolved.[17]

In doing so, Korsmeyer merges the presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies into one single issue, (perhaps) implicitly interpreting the paradox of fiction along the lines earlier described (i.e. by including *being present* as one of the relevant features of the objects of emotion).

Without much systematicity, Korsmeyer sometimes (in fact, more often) emphasizes the presence/representation dichotomy: "unlike other emotions, disgust is aroused immediately by art just as it is by ordinary objects"; "[m]ore than any other emotion, disgust seems to escape the shield of representation and arouse immediate repulsion";[18] "[t]he paradox of fiction refers to a puzzle about the very phenomenon of emotional arousal by works of art. As we saw in the previous chapter, emotions are sensitive to events of particular importance to the subject. Fear signals the *presence* of danger";[19] "[w]hy do audiences cringe in fear at the appearance on-screen of a

[17] Korsmeyer [2011], 53; her emphases.
[18] Korsmeyer [2011], 47.
[19] Korsmeyer [2011], 53; emphasis mine.

ghostly presence, when they believe neither in ghosts *nor* in the reality of the fictional presentation before them?".[20] At other times, (and less often) by contrast, she emphasizes the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy:

> There are several ways to cope with the problem [i.e. the paradox of fiction]. (1) One can deny that emotions entail full beliefs, especially existential beliefs about their objects.[21]

In one passage, Korsmeyer even seems to juxtapose the two distinctions:

> Even with the full knowledge that the image is not of something really existing—say, a body opened for autopsy in a forensic TV drama—the disgust is still prompted by the image. No matter that we know it is not real; it is disgusting whether or not a real-life equivalent stands before one.[22]

Since Korsmeyer does not distinguish between the two dichotomies, I will first present her views on transparency and the paradox of fiction without reference to them. (Here and elsewhere, I aim to be as charitable to Korsmeyer as is possible, by presenting the most coherent and explicitly formulated account of her view that I can reconstruct.) Then I will show that Korsmeyer's views are supported by an implausible view of disgust elicitation. I will get back to the distinction between the presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies at a later stage.

4. The second clarification about Korsmeyer's understanding of the transparency thesis is that the thesis can either be about *representations* or *imita-*

[20] Korsmeyer [2011], 54; emphasis mine.
[21] Korsmeyer [2011], 55.
[22] Korsmeyer [2011], 56.

tions. Korsmeyer is not consistent in her terminology, talking sometimes of one, at other times of the other.[23] However, the difference between the two is far from irrelevant. Representations of the disgusting (whether fictional or not) need not be disgusting if the subject is not represented realistically (or "imitated").[24] Take for instance Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* [1937]. It portrays the bloody massacre of the population of the Basque town of Guernica, bombed by German and Italian war planes during the Spanish Civil War. The painting represents beheadings and dismemberments of men and animals. The subject represented is no doubt disgusting, but the representations themselves clearly are not. In the absence of a clear word on this issue from Korsmeyer, I will, in the interest of charity, restrict the analysis that follows to imitation or realistic representations.[25] [26] As the *Guernica*

[23] For instance, within the same page she uses 'rendered artistically' as well as 'mimesis' (Korsmeyer [2011], 53).

[24] The notion of *realism* that I have in mind here is, for all relevant purposes, the one Berys Gaut [2010], 71ff. calls "perceptual realism". On this notion, a "picture P of an object O is more realistic than a picture P^* of O just in case P resembles O in more recognitionally relevant ways than P^* resembles O". Although comparative in nature, Gaut's definition of perceptual realism yields an absolute or *simpliciter* judgement, once we choose "some threshold of degree of resemblance at which to make the judgement, and this can vary in different contexts" (72). The notion of *resemblance* is notoriously slippery when it comes to theory construction, but it provides a sufficiently intuitive grasp of what realism amounts to for my present purposes. In particular, and although cashed out in terms of Gaut's intuitive definition, the notion of realism I work with is meant to be compatible with different resemblance theories of perceptual or pictorial realism, and perhaps even with some forms of conventionalism. Relatedly, identifying the relevant threshold of resemblance to refer to is going to be a difficult endeavour, but again one that I am not committed to completing in order to make the general claims for which I argue. In Chapter 4, however, I will discuss some concrete examples that aim to shed some light on what the relevant threshold might in some contexts be.

[25] In fact, it is not simply charity that suggests such a reading. The eighteenth-century authors on whose remarks Korsmeyer builds her views on the matter have imitation in mind. Not only do they explicitly mention mimesis and imitation in their remarks, but standardly make reference to artistic traditions that are overwhelmingly realistic.

[26] In this class, literary representations are *included*: Korsmeyer discusses several examples of disgusting literature and certainly takes the transparency thesis to apply to them (cf. for instance Korsmeyer [2011], 56–57). See *infra* for a more extended discussion of this point. Beyond Korsmeyer, there is a *prima facie* reason to consider the transparency thesis as an obvious non-starter in the case of literature. Written descriptions of disgusting objects would seem to be much less powerful than paintings or films in eliciting disgust. And it would seem that a reader should have much less of a sense of presence of the disgust elicitor, as well as be more easily able to resist imaginative engagement in the case of literature. However, things are not as straightforward as they may initially appear. For one thing, this issue hinges on how faithful to reality a representation has to be in order to count as an 'imitation'. Very accurate descriptions of the disgusting can be very powerful. Moreover, it also matters whether or not the transparency at issue has to be judged with respect to art appreciation that involves a sufficient degree of imaginative

example suggests, the transparency thesis is least plausible when applied to non-realistic representations.[27]

2. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937

5. There is a third issue concerning the transparency thesis that needs disambiguation. On a *strong* reading, the thesis claims that an imitation of a disgust elicitor is as disgusting as that elicitor would be if experienced in the flesh (or that the imitation of a fictional disgust elicitor is as disgusting as the counterpart imitation of a counterpart non-fictional disgust elicitor). On a *weak* reading, the claim is just that the imitation and the real thing (or two fictional and non-fictional counterpart imitations) both elicit disgust—even though possibly to different qualitative degrees. Korsmeyer does not express an explicit commitment to either reading, sometimes claiming more prudently that:

> when it is rendered artistically, that which is disgusting in nature remains disgusting in art,[28]

engagement. Without sufficient engagement, one might argue, a response to a work ought not to be considered when judging transparency. The latter would in fact not be an appropriate response, or not (even) a response to a work *of art*. I will discuss this issue further in Chapter 4.

[27] I discuss *Guernica* and realistic/non-realistic representations some more in Chapter 4.

[28] Korsmeyer [2011], 53.

whilst at other times she more explicitly leans towards the strong reading:

> A narrative or work of art arouses disgust by the mere description or picture of something that is disgusting in nature, and when this occurs, the description or picture is itself disgusting in just about the same way.[29]

In fact, for reasons that will be evident later on in this chapter, the motivations she puts forward for the transparency thesis commit her to its strong version.

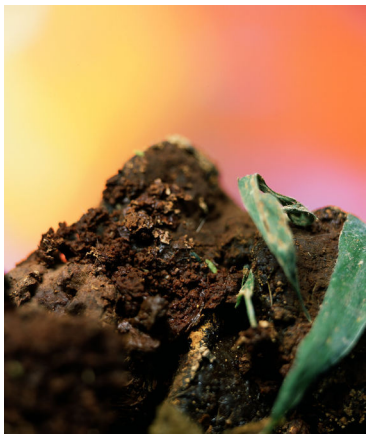
6. Fourthly, and finally, although Korsmeyer is not explicit on this point, it is a fair reconstruction of her view to say that, for her, the transparency thesis involves a *ceteris paribus* claim. For instance, on Korsmeyer's transparency thesis, the picture of a surface smeared with faeces (or the picture of a fictional surface smeared with faeces) is as disgusting as the same surface (or the picture of a non-fictional surface) would, when seen from a comparable viewpoint to that afforded by the picture (from the same distance, in the same lighting conditions etc.). This is especially important for the presence/representation dichotomy, as it makes the import of Korsmeyer's transparency thesis for art appreciation less momentous than it may appear at first. In real life, in fact, we ordinarily encounter objects by means of various different senses. By contrast, art mostly provides us only with partial sensory cues (mainly visual and auditory). Thus ordinary, real-life encounters with, say, faeces will, as a rule, be more disgusting than Andres Serrano's *Romantic Shit* photograph [2008].[30] This is in line with the

[29] Korsmeyer [2012], 757.

[30] One of Serrano's sixty-six photographic close-ups of human, dog, jaguar and bull faeces, as exhibited in *Shit*, at the Yvon Lambert Gallery in New York.

following remark of Korsmeyer's:

> disgust in art usually has its own mitigation—if not mediation—because its [gustatory and olfactory] sensory triggers are rarely present in art at all.[31]



3. Andres Serrano, *Romantic Shit*, 2007

7. Having looked at the characterization of Korsmeyer's transparency thesis, I now want to discuss the reasons she advances in its support. These lie in what can be called a 'sensory model of disgust elicitation'. She says for instance that:

> disgust can be aroused by an image that is not taken to be real. It can be induced by the *presentation of sensory qualities alone*, regardless of whether one believes in the existence of the object possessing those qualities.[32]

But, Korsmeyer adds, "disgust is not alone in having sensory triggers".[33] Here she draws a parallel with the case of startle as presented by Jenefer

[31] Korsmeyer [2011], 57.
[32] Korsmeyer [2011], 55; my emphasis. Cf. note 42 below for more on the meaning of 'real' in this quote.
[33] Korsmeyer [2011], 55.

Robinson.[34] On Robinson's account, startle is an emotion that does not require cognitive mediation to be triggered. The mere perception of certain characteristics of one's environment (e.g. a sudden loud sound), without any interpretation of the nature or provenance of the sound, is typically sufficient for startle elicitation. The same, Korsmeyer says, happens with disgust. In films, for instance:

> The object of startle is in the film itself, so like disgust its intentional object is immediately present as a component of the artwork.[35]

In other words, the intentional object of the disgust elicited by a (cinematic) image (i.e. the object one's disgust is about) is the image itself. In parallel to what happens (on Robinson's view) with startle, disgust is, according to Korsmeyer, elicited by the uninterpreted perception of certain sensory qualities.

Korsmeyer's sensory model of disgust elicitation naturally supports the (strong reading of the) transparency thesis. If disgust is elicited by the mere perception of sensory qualities, then it follows that, *ceteris paribus* and given all the caveats earlier specified, a representation of something disgusting, one that realistically reproduces its sensory features (or a realistic representation of a fictional disgust elicitor), will be as disgusting as the real thing (or as a realistic representation of a counterpart non-fictional disgust elicitor). In other words, on Korsmeyer's model, disgustingness is independent of the assumed existence (as well as presence to and power to affect an audience)

[34] See Jenefer Robinson [1995].
[35] Korsmeyer [2011], 56.

of an object that actually possesses those sensory features. Thus it is a corollary of Korsmeyer's sensory view that disgust occupies a very peculiar place among emotions with respect to the paradox of fiction. She in fact concludes that:

> Different emotions require different solutions to the paradox [of fiction], but the need to choose among these alternatives is avoided altogether by the transparency of disgust.[36]

To repeat, the paradox of fiction arises from the joint inconsistency of the three claims (1)–(3) mentioned earlier. A solution to the paradox will typically have to reject one (or more) of the claims (1)–(3). Nevertheless, Korsmeyer contends, one need not follow any of the major routes that have been proposed for other emotions. The major alternative routes that she considers are three. One route is to reject claim (2) by suggesting that entertaining the possibility of the existence of certain objects as having certain features is sufficient for disgust elicitation (this is a particular case of a class of solutions, heralded by Peter Lamarque, that appeal to the sufficiency of entertaining thoughts[37]). A second route goes through recognizing an existence of sorts for the (apparently) fictional objects of emotion (for example as "abstract artifacts", as Amie Thomasson proposes[38]). This route calls claim (1) into question, as either false or not relevant. The third route surveyed by Korsmeyer also calls claim (1) into question. It does so by reclassifying the emotional reactions we have to fictions as something different

[36] Korsmeyer [2011], 55.
[37] See especially Peter Lamarque [1981]. The name by which such theories are standardly referred to, 'thought theory', was coined by Carroll [1990]. Levinson [2006] deviates from standard practice and uses the phrase 'anti-judgmentalist' to refer to such solutions (43).
[38] See Amie Thomasson [1999].

from genuine instances of garden-variety emotional states ("quasi-emotions", on Walton's influential account[39]).

In virtue of the transparency of disgust, Korsmeyer suggests, "the need to choose among these alternatives is avoided altogether".[40] In fact, she adds, the paradox of fiction "is easily resolved" in the case of disgust.[41] Given Korsmeyer's sensory view of disgust elicitation, in fact, her favoured route to the solution of the paradox must go through calling (1) into question. On her view, the disgust elicited by an artistic representation of something disgusting is not caused by the disgusting thing that one knows to be fictional (i.e. absent or non-existent). Instead, it is caused by the sensory qualities present in the representation. These latter are the intentional object of the disgust and are, as Korsmeyer says, "a component of the artwork". By contrast, claim (2) need not be rejected, for one need not doubt the existence of the objects that one's disgust is directed towards—which are, on Korsmeyer's view, sensory qualities.[42]

[39] See Kendall Walton [1990].

[40] Korsmeyer [2011], 55.

[41] Korsmeyer [2011], 53. Korsmeyer is not consistent throughout. Although she mostly talks of disgust's peculiarity in terms of its affording an easier solution to the paradox of fiction than other emotions, she also concludes her discussion of the topic by saying that: "The immediacy of the arousal of disgust by art converts one of the characteristics of this emotion traditionally considered an aesthetic deficiency to a small advantage: there is no paradox of fiction that arises with disgust" (Korsmeyer [2011], 58). This sentence would seem to suggest that the peculiarity of disgust, for Korsmeyer, is that the paradox does not even arise, and not that it is "easily resolved". I can see no way to make the sentence fit in with the rest of Korsmeyer's discussion. The best account of the sentence is as an inconsistency on her part.

[42] There are two sentences of Korsmeyer's that may seem inconsistent with this account of her views. In both, she is making the point that, contrary to the case of fear, it is obvious that the disgust had towards disgusting things in films is real, unalloyed disgust. In one, she says that: "We are really disgusted even when we know the intentional object of disgust is a fiction." A few lines later, she adds: "No matter that we know it [i.e. a disgusting image in a film] is not real; it is disgusting whether or not a real-life equivalent stands before one" (Korsmeyer [2011], 56). The question here arises: why does Korsmeyer say that the intentional object is "a fiction" and "not real"? The intentional object of disgust in these cases is the image (i.e. a sensory object), Korsmeyer has already told us; and the image as a sensory object surely is real, and not fictional. I do not think Korsmeyer is contradicting herself here; she is merely choosing her words somewhat confusingly. The intentional object of disgust is indeed the disgusting image, yet Korsmeyer misleadingly says it is "a fiction", or "not real", in the sense that it is not a real-life disgusting object like the object that the image is of (here again there is a greater emphasis on the presence/representation than on the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy). In fact, this is not the first time that she qualifies images as "not real" in this sense: a page earlier she had said that "disgust can be aroused by an image that is not

Thus, Korsmeyer's sensory view of disgust elicitation supports both the transparency thesis and a peculiar approach to the paradox of fiction. However, the sensory view of disgust should be resisted, for it is not borne out by the available empirical evidence. The mainstream view of disgust elicitation among experimental psychologists is in fact *ideational*, rather than sensory.

8. The paradigm in disgust studies in contemporary experimental psychology was set by the pioneering research conducted from the late 1980s by the psychologist Paul Rozin and his colleagues. At the basis of Rozin's view there is a distinction between distaste and disgust. Not all things that taste bad are disgusting, while not all disgusting things taste bad. (The same point holds for other senses as well and for their correlative reactions of 'dis-smell', 'dis-touch', etc.).

While distaste is a reaction primarily motivated by the sensory features of objects, disgust primarily concerns the nature of objects (and their history of contact with other objects). On the basis of informal observations, for example, Rozin and April Fallon found that a subject who sniffs decay odours from two opaque vials containing the same substance will like the odour coming from the vial that, she is told, contains cheese, and be disgusted by the odour of the vial that she is told contains faeces.[43] Rozin and Fallon's informal observations were then subsequently confirmed experimentally.[44] Moreover, substances that many would be disgusted at the prospect of eating—e.g. insects or faeces—are disgusting in virtue of what they are

taken to be real" (Korsmeyer [2011], 55). I am grateful to Peter Lamarque and a member of the Mind & Reason Group at the University of York for pointing out this potential inconsistency to me.

[43] See Paul Rozin and Fallon [1987], 24n.

[44] See Rachel Herz *et al.* [2001].

(thought to be), rather than of their sensory properties.[45] Many of us have never actually tasted insects or faeces. And some in fact come to like eating insects if they try them and manage to overcome their initial disgust.

In fact, confronted with the same sensory features, ideational factors may cause one to go from disgust to another emotion, and vice versa. Consider an example offered by Andras Angyal [1941], in the ground-breaking paper that anticipates many of the conclusions of Rozin's experimental work:

> I was walking through a field and passed by a shack from which a strong odor, which I took for that of some decaying dead animal, penetrated my nostrils. My first reaction was that of an intense disgust. In the next moment I discovered that I had made a mistake and recognized the odor as that of glue. The feeling of disgust immediately disappeared and the odor now seemed quite agreeable, probably because of some rather pleasant associations with carpentry.[46]

The reverse case is also possible. Take for instance those nightmares—or even real circumstances—that many report to have experienced, in which one sees a funny object on their body and finds it interesting or curious, only to then realize with horror and disgust that the funny object is actually a venomous spider or insect. Here the sensory features of the object are not sufficient to elicit disgust; consideration of the nature of the object perceived is necessary to change the response from one of curiosity to one of repulsion.

The sensory features of an object are thus, typically, not sufficient to elicit

[45] More precisely, they are disgusting in virtue of what we take them to be or of their history of contact, given our lists of disgust elicitors. Cf. Chapter 2 for more details on disgust elicitation.
[46] Angyal [1941], 394–5.

disgust; and it is in fact ideational considerations that have a primary role in disgust elicitation. The same sensory qualities elicit different emotional responses, depending on their interpretation. *Contra* Korsmeyer, disgust elicitation is fundamentally ideational in nature—not sensory.

9. In fact, in a different section of her book, concerning disgustingness and deliciousness of foods, Korsmeyer does briefly discuss the issue of ideational disgust elicitation as it is raised by Rozin's work. In this context, she objects to the ideational view by rejecting the *de facto* separability between the sensory and the ideational. Rozin's ideational view of disgust, she suggests,

> assumes that sensory properties are severable from properties of something, that is, that there is such a thing as full and complete sensory properties *tout court*. [But] there is no coherent sensation without cognition—that is, without taking the object of sensation to be something or other. Different interpretations of the object of taste or smell yield different sense experiences. This is not the claim that one has a sensation that is then interpreted and categorized, but rather that without a category the sensation itself is inchoate and indistinct.[47]

Some of Korsmeyer's suggestions here are not implausible. In particular, it may well be the case that a sensation is "inchoate and indistinct" if it is not accompanied by an ideation concerning its object. But the ideational view of disgust does not need to deny that. The ideational view only points out that ideation has the primary role over sensation in the elicitation of

[47] Korsmeyer [2011], 65.

disgust. Different ideational interpretations of the same sensory features can result in different emotional reactions.

Beyond this, there is Korsmeyer's point that "full and complete sensory properties" do not exist in isolation from a cognition concerning the object that they are properties of. But this cannot be taken to deny that there is a distinction between a sensory and an ideational component within a "full and complete" sensory property. Korsmeyer herself has to rely on such a distinction when she claims that "different interpretations of the object of taste or smell yield different sense experiences". This is a *ceteris paribus* claim that assumes that everything else is kept constant, apart from ideational factors. Whether what is kept constant is called 'sensory properties' or 'the sensory component' within "full and complete sensory properties" is nothing more than a terminological matter.

Once terminological differences are resolved, Korsmeyer's suggestions do nothing but bolster my criticism of her view of representation/fiction and disgust. It is perhaps worth repeating here that what Korsmeyer needs for her view to be true is that claim (1) is false of disgusting art. In other words, she needs it to be the case that the appreciator does not have emotions towards objects that they believe to be non-real or non-present. Instead, the relevant objects of disgust for Korsmeyer are (real and really present) sensory properties. However, this cannot be the case if, as she now claims, coherent sensations are always sensations of some object. If, in fact, the object of a sensation is non-existing or absent then the relevant sensation will trigger an emotion towards a non-existing or absent (i.e. fictional)[48]

[48] Here it is perhaps worth further emphasizing that Korsmeyer does not work with a clear distinction between the presence/representation and fictional/non-fictional dichotomies. Non-existing and absent

object. But Korsmeyer cannot accept this conclusion for disgust as it would make claim (1) true.

Moreover, consider again Korsmeyer's earlier quoted claim that the intentional object of our cinematic disgust is "a component of the artwork". This cannot be the case. In fact, the kinds of behavioural responses we typically have to disgusting representations overlap only partially with those typical of real-life disgust. For example, we tend to turn our heads and shun our glances away from a disgusting object represented on a cinema screen; by contrast, in the presence of a real-life disgusting object that could touch us we often keep our eyes steadily on the object, to make sure we do not get in contact with it. Moreover, reaching with our hands to touch an actual disgusting object is behaviour only very few of us would ever willingly engage in (if we can avoid it). But if the disgusting object is only pictured on a cinema screen, I think a lot of us, at least a lot of the time, would be relatively untroubled by the prospect of touching the screen.[49]

10. What we typically find disgusting, then, are not the mere, uninterpreted sensory features offered by a representation. However, it is worth stressing that an ideational view of disgust is compatible with the *possibility* of disgust elicitation without ideation. It is in other words possible that, in some cases,

objects of emotion can therefore be equally understood as "fictional".

[49] There are however cases that involve a closer similarity between behavioural responses to representations and to real-life circumstances. Perhaps the most striking of such cases are presented in Paul Rozin *et al.* [1986]. In one of these cases, for instance, experimental subjects exhibit reluctance to eat pieces of chocolate fudge presented to them in the shape of dog faeces. In other words, similarity to a disgusting object can make otherwise acceptable, or even desirable objects become significantly less acceptable or desirable. Nonetheless, the existence of such cases does not disprove the point that, *typically*, there are significant differences in behaviour between representational and real-life disgust scenarios. First, the cases do not show that there is significant similarity between all kinds of behavioural responses to representational and real-life disgust situations, but only that there is similarity in some particular behaviour (e.g. propensity to eat). Moreover, the cases concerning physical disgust reported in Rozin *et al.* [1986] are not typical cases as far as art is concerned, as they all involve highly realistic, tridimensional representations of disgust elicitors.

disgust may be elicited independently of ideational considerations. Indeed, there is some empirical evidence supporting the existence of quick-and-ready elicitation for some emotions.[50] This possibility has been interpreted by some as involving sensory, or non-cognitive, elicitation.[51]

Even assuming it is a correct interpretation of the empirical data,[52] this would not provide support for Korsmeyer's statement of the peculiarity of the case of disgust among emotions. In fact, theorists of non-cognitive persuasions take their theories to account for many more emotions besides disgust. The empirical evidence they appeal to is predominantly obtained for other basic emotions, particularly fear (and in members of animal species such as rodents, which are usually considered not to have evolved full-blown disgust[53]). Moreover, and more importantly, according to such theorists, cognitive modulation kicks in soon after the initial non-cognitive stage of emotion elicitation.[54] Cognitive modulation in turn results in continuation, modification or discontinuation of the initial emotional reaction. But aesthetic appreciation is usually a matter of longer-than-instantaneous exposure to a representation.

The implausibility of a sensory view of disgust elicitation takes support away from Korsmeyer's claims about the peculiarity of disgust. As things stand after her contribution, disgust is not different from many other emotions, including fear, in that (a) the solutions standardly suggested for the paradox of fiction are also the most promising solutions available for disgust,

[50] See Joseph LeDoux [1998].
[51] See Jenefer Robinson [2005].
[52] Although, see for instance Martha Nussbaum [2001], 114–115, for a criticism of non-cognitive interpretations of this kind.
[53] See Rachel Herz [2012], 82–83.
[54] See again Robinson [2005].

and (b), the transparency thesis for disgust is false both with respect to the presence/representation and the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy. In principle, this does not rule out the possibility that a better and ultimately successful case might be made for the transparency of disgust or for the peculiarity of disgust with respect to the paradox of fiction. But such a case will have to be found by following different lines of thought from those against which I have so far argued.[55]

11. In fact, my own view is that both the weak and strong readings of the transparency thesis, both with respect to the presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies, are false. Disgust is elicited by a (fictional or non-fictional) representation in the same way that many other emotions (including fear, pity, anger etc.) are. Firstly, the intentional object of the disgust is the subject of the representation (whether existing or not). Secondly, where belief is not appropriate, a viewer, spectator, reader etc. will entertain the thought of, or *imagine* what is represented if she is to be disgusted.[56] Finally, this means that the solution to the paradox of fiction, if one is needed,[57] is provided by thought theory (i.e. by claiming that the

[55] Some of the material presented in this chapter so far is also presented in a paper forthcoming in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*: Contesi [forthcoming]. For helpful feedback, I owe a special debt of gratitude to two anonymous referees for the *BJA*.

[56] Here, and throughout, I use 'imagine' and 'entertain thoughts' (and their cognates) to refer to the same psychological phenomenon, thus ignoring more subtle differences between the standard meanings of the two expressions. Cf. also White [1990].

[57] I want to remain uncommitted on the issue of whether or not there is a need to solve a paradox of fiction for disgust. This hinges on issues of pre-theoretical intuitions about the *prima facie* plausibility of the three claims generating the paradox. In particular, one might have the pre-theoretical intuition that claim (2) above ("Emotions had towards objects or situations require beliefs in the existence of those objects or situations as possessing certain features") is obviously false in the case of disgust. To someone who has this intuition, there is no paradox of fiction. But I find it difficult (as well as uninteresting) to tell whether I have this intuition. To be sure, it would seem intuitively true that claim (2) is less plausible for disgust than it is for, e.g. pity. But whether or not it is absolutely *prima facie* implausible, I am not sure. Perhaps I have been thinking about these issues for too long now to reconstruct my *prima facie* intuitions. However, *prima facie* issues and intuitions are uninteresting in the context of a thorough and in-depth analysis like the one that I develop here. For the readers who had a clear pre-theoretical intuition that there is no paradox of fiction for disgust, I can only hope that my discussion of the paradox

imagination is sufficient to elicit genuine, garden-variety emotions). In all of these respects disgust works in the same way as many other emotions.

In fact, let us consider what happens when a representation elicits disgust. Say there is a realistic painting of a festering wound. There is an appreciator, she looks at the painting, and she is disgusted. One question to ask is: What is she disgusted about? On Korsmeyer's sensory view as I have outlined it, it is the image in the painting itself ("[disgust's] intentional object is immediately present as a component of the artwork"). On my view, it is the depicted festering wound (whether existing or not). The appreciator feels disgust at the depicted festering wound by either believing that there is a festering wound, or by entertaining the thought of a festering wound. Since, as I have shown, the sensory view is ill at ease with the way disgust as an emotion actually works, an alternative is needed. My view has the obvious advantage of being compatible with the ideational character of disgust. Before embracing the view that I suggest, however, one should look around to see if there are other, better alternatives.

12. One possible candidate is: the image interpreted. This is not a simple intentional object. It is constituted by the sensory features of the depicted festering wound (e.g. red-ish colour, irregular shape etc.) and by our cognition that it is a festering wound. Although this may perhaps sound appealing as a mid-way view between mine and Korsmeyer's, it is actually an implausible suggestion. The complex object postulated by this view (sensory-features-cum-cognition) is not a typical object of emotions. It is a rather spooky one, rather hovering unstably, as it does, between world and

of fiction here enables a better understanding of the phenomena involved in representing disgust than they had before starting to read.

mind. Sensory features are standardly located in the external world; cognitions are mental. There certainly are non-standard metaphysical theories that would be at ease with mind-world composite objects, or with an overcoming of the mind-matter dichotomy.[58] Whatever the actual metaphysics of the world is, however, it would be a big bullet to bite for a disgust theorist to accept that disgust is intentionally directed towards psycho-material, or half-mental, half-material objects. It would make disgust a very peculiar emotion. All other emotions are in fact directed towards objects out in the world or within us. I fear a big bear approaching, you fear that your own insecurity will jeopardize the relationship with your husband; Roberta is angry at a thug slapping her in the face, George is angry at himself for not teaching his son more self-discipline, etc.

Now, could it be that the disgust felt at the picture of the festering wound is directed within us, at our mental image of the wound? Again, this sounds like an implausible characterization of the phenomenon. There is an image of a wound out there, and it seems much more plausible that the object of disgust is the wound represented (whether actually existing or simply imagined). Neither are linguistic representations any different, even though they often involve greater imaginative work on the appreciator's part. Even when emotions are directed towards ourselves, it is towards features of us, like for instance laziness, insecurity, or flabby cheeks. Hearing of someone having emotions towards mental images will generally make us think of them as a victim of delusions.

[58] John Gibson [1979] seems to have a conception of this kind in mind in his understanding of affordance. Merleau-Ponty [1964a] and Merleau-Ponty [1964b] may also be interpreted as endorsing a view of this kind, in his "overcoming the subject-object dichotomy" (Moran [1999], 429).

But, one might object, what matters is not really the intentional object of disgust, but its cause. Although they often coincide, intentional object and cause of an emotion can come apart. Consider for example Wendy, who is angry at Bernie because she believes he stole her car, when in fact the thief was Angela. It is possible to construct this scenario in a way that attributes no causal role to Bernie; but Wendy's anger is directed at him.[59] So, the objection goes, it might be that, although the intentional object of disgust is the festering wound as depicted in the painting, the emotion is actually caused by the image in the painting, interpreted as a festering wound. But this objection misses the target, because it does not offer an alternative picture to the one that I endorse. The image interpreted is indeed likely to be one of the causes of the disgust felt by the viewer of the festering-wound painting. Also a cause, however, is the viewer's *imagining* the depicted festering wound (supported by the interpreted image).[60]

Finally, what if the intentional object of the aforementioned viewer's disgust is any instance of the class of festering wounds that looks like the wound in the painting—rather than the particular wound that is represented? I am not sure that this option makes much sense. It is worth remembering here that the example representation in hand is not necessarily of something existing. But if it is a picture of a made-up wound, then there would seem to be no relevant difference between disgust at a particular, imaginary festering wound and disgust at a generic festering wound (assuming that there are

[59] Cf. de Sousa [1987], 110ff.

[60] Moreover, elicitation of other emotions, too, is likely to involve in many cases (mental) images as a cause. Whether images are *necessary* to disgust elicitation is a question that deserves to be addressed, and is in fact neglected in both the scientific and philosophical literature. For the purposes of the present thesis, I will leave this as an open question.

no differences in imagined appearance between the two). The mechanism of the viewer's disgust will in both cases involve imagining a festering wound of the appropriate kind.[61]

So, just like in the case of fear, pity and many other emotions, the disgust felt before a representation of something disgusting is directed at the subject of the representation (whether existing or not) and elicited via the appreciator's recognitional, or imaginative capacities (where beliefs are not appropriate). In the terms of thought theory, this means that the object of an appreciator's disgust is the subject as imagined and its cause is the entertained thought. However, if the relevant mechanics of elicitation are the same for disgust as for many other emotions, what of the *prima facie* phenomenological truth behind Korsmeyer's and eighteenth-century endorsements of the transparency thesis? It seems hard to deny that disgust is often elicited by representations much more easily and certainly than is the case with many other emotions.[62] In fact, I accept this truth. But I suggest that it should be explained by the greater ease and passivity of the imaginative effort often required with disgust, which is in turn motivated by disgust's object-centricity and the consequent objectual emphasis proper to much disgust elicitation. This objectual emphasis also accounts for cases in which existential beliefs are involved (i.e. especially with non-fictional representations).

13. Before I come to my account of objectual emphasis and ease of elicita-

[61] I am grateful to Chris Jay for a very helpful conversation on the issues discussed in the last few paragraphs.

[62] This is especially true in the case of fictional representations, since disgust, compared to emotions like fear, is less sensitive to lack of presence and existence of the subject of the representation; cf. also Chapter 2.

tion, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the line of argument presented so far makes the transparency thesis of disgust, both in its stronger and weaker readings, implausible. Here it is again appropriate to distinguish between the presence/representation and fiction/non-fiction dichotomies. As far as the former dichotomy is concerned, disgust is sensitive to the presence, or power to affect of a disgusting object. A direct encounter with an actually present, or potentially affecting disgusting thing will in many cases be more disgusting than an encounter with a picture, however realistic, of the same thing. In fact, a realistic representation of the disgusting can even be non-disgusting to a viewer who, for instance, managed to imagine its subject as being something different (i.e. misinterpreted it) and non-disgusting.

Similar considerations are appropriate to the fiction/non-fiction case. Consider for instance a realistic film scene involving a gruesome, bloody crime. Although it is unlikely that a spectator avoids some immediate disgust at the scene, it is possible for her emotional reaction to weaken, or even for her to grow out of her disgust completely. What can help her to do that is to imagine the blood and gore as being something else—ketchup, for instance. This squeamish spectator's imaginative endeavour can in turn be aided by *knowing* or *believing* that the blood and gore in the scene are merely fictional: it is in fact not blood and gore, but, say, a special effect involving ketchup.

Nonetheless, presence and power to affect the emoter (but not so much significant others) are generally more important for disgust elicitation than fictionality. In fact, the difference in disgust elicitation power between a really present, potentially affecting object and a representation of it is generally significantly greater than the counterpart difference that there is

between fictional and non-fictional representations of the same disgusting thing.

Although the transparency thesis is not true, the disgusting is much more easily elicited by representations than emotions like fear are. This marks an important difference between disgust and those other emotions, although not the one that Korsmeyer had in mind.[63] The key to understanding why this is so is what I have characterized in Chapter 2 as the object-centricity of disgust, as opposed to the situation-centricity of emotions like fear.

14. As a general rule, things that are fearsome in one context are not necessarily fearsome in a different context. I can fear a bus coming towards me if I am standing in the middle of the road, but be thrilled at the sight of the same bus coming towards me, while waiting at the bus stop for my mother, who is on the bus coming to visit me after a long separation. By contrast, and again as a general rule, I find things disgusting regardless of the context in which I encounter them. Moreover, the situations which I do not want to find myself in when I encounter something disgusting collapse into one single category: getting into (direct or mediated) contact with that thing (by touching it, ingesting it etc.). Conversely, I can fear many, very different types of situations: fear to be hit by something pointed, fear not to be kissed by my wife of thirty years after a period of cold between us, fear to know that my bank account is in the red, fear to move my scalpel too quickly while performing a delicate surgical procedure etc. But

[63] Whether or not my view of this difference is also in conflict with the abovementioned German-speaking eighteenth-century views is instead not so clear to me. The expression 'transparency thesis' is a term of art coined by Korsmeyer, and the link between that thesis and the paradox of fiction is also hers. Moreover, she has a much less cognitive view of disgust elicitation than the eighteenth-century authors make transpire from their work; cf. Chapter 1 for more details.

most, if not all of the objects in these fearsome situations, are, in different circumstances, objects of very different emotions or emotionally neutral. Moreover, a crucial feature of situations that renders some of them fearsome and others not is the relationship with the emoter (or her significant others). Situations can be threatening for someone in many different ways, whereas the concern relevant to disgusting objects is generally limited to one type of relationship, i.e. physical contact with the disgust elicitor or with things that were previously in contact with it.

As I have argued in Chapter 2, this state of affairs led to disgust being an object-centric emotion and fear a situation-centric one. What this means is that a lot of the time disgust is elicited through the mere recognition, or imagination etc. of a disgusting object. By contrast, the situation in which the disgusting object is, including its presence to, or power to affect, the emoter (or her significant others) is often implicit or bracketed, and hence unnecessary for disgust elicitation. By contrast, in order for fear to be elicited, recognition, imagination etc. typically need to be directed at something more than just an object, i.e. a situation, which includes a relationship of threat with the emoter (or significant others). In the case of disgust, object-centricity enhances the immediacy and stubbornness of elicitation already proper to other emotions, especially basic emotions such as fear.[64] [65]

[64] An additional degree of immediacy (and hence stubbornness) might be proper to recognitional or imaginative projects involving disgust elicitors towards which we had a hard-wired preparedness. There is in fact evidence in analogous phenomena, for instance facial *pareidolia*, of an innate, especially stubborn propensity to recognize significant figures or patterns, such as, for instance, faces on pieces of toasted bread; see e.g. Liu and Lee [2013].

[65] I am here talking of the emotional reaction had *during* exposure to a representation. About what happens after exposure ceases, disgust seems to be relatively easy to vanish. Fear, on the other hand, or, more appropriately, the disposition to fear, can last quite a long time (after, say, one goes home after watching a gripping thriller film at the cinema).

Also, of course (and generally speaking), the more *realistic* a representation is, the easier (or the harder) it will be to recognize, or imagine etc. (or stop recognizing, imagining etc.) its subject. But, in disgust, object-centricity means that often mere object recognition will suffice for disgust elicitation. From this comes the accentuated importance of the senses in disgust, when compared to emotions such as fear. The senses mostly play a more direct or straightforward part in object recognition than they do in the recognition of situations. They do so insofar as they more directly capture physical features of objects; features of situations are captured by the senses only in a more complex way (e.g. through more complex coordination between different sense modalities, or with a greater role of more sophisticated cognition). It is in this respect, if any, that the senses have a central importance in disgust—not as part and parcel of a sensory view of disgust.

Aurel Kolnai may in fact be a predecessor of my understanding of the role of the senses in disgust. Kolnai in fact points out that, whereas fear is "principally directed" towards "being" [*Dasein*], disgust is primarily directed towards "so-being" [*Sosein*].[66] Korsmeyer [2011] interprets Kolnai's remarks on disgust as "resonat[ing]" with "the strong sensory grounding of the emotion and the way it commands attention to the presentation to the senses, regardless of its [*sic*] mode of existence".[67] However, I am inclined to read Kolnai differently, i.e., summarily, as highlighting the primary role in disgust elicitation of the *features* of the elicitor, rather than of its presence to an emoter. He does after all talk of *Sosein* (being-so-and-so) vs *Dasein* (being

[66] Kolnai [1929/2004], 44.
[67] Korsmeyer [2011], 47.

present).[68] The role of the senses only comes as a consequence of the role of the elicitor's being-so-and-so/features.

The fact that features of its elicitors have an important role in disgust accounts for the fact that disgust is so powerful in the visual and performance arts, or, in literature, when disgust elicitors are described in some detail.[69] As a rough rule of thumb, one could say that the visual arts afford more vivid and immediately realistic renderings of features of things and literature is instead more adept at the accurate rendering of features of situations. Moreover, the greater ease and immediacy of disgust elicitation (as opposed to fear elicitation) is connected with a set of features that are very often proper to art. With some possible exceptions, like some cases of interactive or landscape art, artworks are very often *disconnected* from the appreciator, in the sense that the latter is not part of, a subject of, or a contributor to, the work. This makes a lot of art independently prone to affording an object-centric experience in the sense at issue. To this one should also perhaps add the overall staticity and bidimensionality of much art. In principle, one can for example imagine an art installation which had audiences stand over a glass floor on a montainous precipice (real or realistically portrayed). In such a case, fear would ensue with comparable levels of ease and immediacy to those more often achieved in disgusting art. As a matter of fact, however, such an imagined art installation would be very much unlike what has so far been produced in traditional, and even in most contemporary art.

[68] Smith and Korsmeyer's translated terms "so-being" and "being" is not completely felicitous; see Kolnai [1929/2004], 44.

[69] Cf. Chapter 4 for examples of disgusting literature.

4. Categories of Disgusting Art

1. In its age-old attempt to document, analyse, or even distance itself from the world, art has presented us with plenty of disgusting material.[1] In order to better understand the role of disgust in the arts, this chapter advances a categorization of types of artistic treatments of the disgusting. Given the complex nature of both art and the emotions, I am certain that the categorization offered will not straightforwardly and neatly sort all artworks in which disgust or the disgusting play a role. But I do hope this categorization will turn out to be useful in highlighting certain important characteristics of disgusting art.

2. Some caveats are in order first. Firstly, the categorization presented here presupposes, as a rule, full knowledge of what the artwork is in each case, including that it is an artwork of a certain kind (e.g. that it is a representation rather than 'the real thing'). Moreover, I subscribe to an understanding of art appreciation that is not restricted to aesthetic values narrowly construed, but includes contextual, cognitive and moral values where appropriate. Thirdly, I will generally avoid focusing on artworks' capacity to *elicit disgust*, preferring the more 'objective' focus on an artwork's *being disgust-*

[1] Even Paleolithic art appears to offer examples of disgusting art, or at least of art that represents the disgusting (e.g. blood from wounds or animals defecating), as R. Dale Guthrie [2005], 270ff. suggests.

ing. The aim behind this choice is to insulate art appreciation as much as possible from actual emotional experiences of individual art appreciators. This serves two purposes: (1) it avoids reliance on less-than-competent or idiosyncratic art appreciators; (2) it allows for an emotional artwork to be correctly appreciated without actual emotion elicitation on the appreciator's part (but with only, for instance, the recognition of appropriateness of a particular set of emotions).[2] Fourthly, and finally, what is and is not disgusting varies across time and individuals in the way described in Chapter 2. However, once more, there is a significant degree of stability in what disgusts one at different times in our lives as well as cross-individual convergence in disgust elicitors. In keeping with what I have been doing throughout this thesis, I will strive to keep to what appear as the least controversial instantiations of disgustingness.

3. In the first category are abstract and non-representational artworks. I put into this category abstract art properly speaking, as well as non-representational music. However, I deal with other instances of non-representational art, which I call 'presentational art' (e.g. installation and performance art), in section 5. The question is then: can abstract art so defined be disgusting? If so, which works satisfy the definition, and why?

Let me start with the second question. If there is a way for abstract art to be disgusting, then the following might seem to be three promising candidates. One way is to have an artwork which, although abstract, is made of disgusting materials. A case in point is Stuart Brisley's mixed-media

[2] Peter Lamarque makes the case for a choice of this kind with respect to emotions in literature in his talk "Emotions and Literature", given at the University of York on 29th November 2012, as well as in his manuscript "Poetry and Expression".

canvas *Royal Ordure* [1996]. Brisley's work is essentially faeces smeared over a canvas. Although it (arguably) does not represent, it is disgusting. Note, however, that this is a case that borders with my category of presentational art.

4. Stuart Brisley, *Royal Ordure*, 1996

Another possibility involves disgusting sounds or smells, which, in the absence of a visual representation, might count as abstract art for some, and be disgusting. Consider for instance an installation which emitted loud high whining and low innard-wobbling noises and an acrid smell of vinegar.[3] This, however, would be an instance of abstract art only on a dubious definition of abstract art. These noises and smells would be disgusting in virtue of their representing (or presenting), albeit in a non-visual mode, certain disgusting things.

[3] I am indebted to James Andow for this example.

A third, perhaps far-fetched possibility is to envisage a work of art in which the audience is required to ingest an emetic substance. In such a case, although the audience's response would not be triggered by any representation and it would certainly involve components of the disgust response, we would not have disgusting abstract art. First, this example would be a stretch of the notion of a *disgusting piece* of art. If the work makes any sense at all, it does so as an interactive piece. As such, it would be as misleading to call it disgusting, as it would be to call it disgust*ed* (as the audience may be). Moreover, although this point might only persuade those who endorse one of a subset of the available theories of emotions, the audience's reaction is not actually one of disgust. Although in the case in hand there would be some of the phenomenological, physiological and behavioural reactions typical of disgust, there would not be an important cognitive component. What would in fact be the audience's disgust *at*? Moreover, there would also be phenomenological and behavioural differences (if not physiological ones, too). Self-report would confirm this. If one asked members of the audience what they were feeling, they would not say they are disgusted, but, much more probably, that they are nauseated. Finally, and importantly, the artwork described would hardly be an instance of abstract art. None of the candidates identified work. My conclusion is that no properly speaking abstract art is disgusting.

However, this conclusion does not take into account the possibility of an abstract artwork that is disgusting in virtue of words of disgusting things displayed on it. Now, an instance of this might well count as abstract art understood as non-figurative art, if it does not deploy any figurative element. But it would not be an instance of abstract art understood as non-

representational art, given the presence in it of linguistic representations. Terminology aside, this case straightforwardly resembles, for my purposes here, that of literary works, and I discuss literary works in section 11 below.[4]

Finally, there are art movements that lie at the intersection of abstract and representational art that do have plausible examples of disgusting art. An instance is provided by artist Philip Guston, one of the leaders of the move from abstract expressionism of the post-war years to neo-expressionism.[5] Some of his works, for instance *Monument* [1976] and *Painter's Forms no 2* [1978] are (mildly) disgusting for the resemblances that the ambiguous images in them bear to disgusting things. The Dutch abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning thought of Guston's trademark ambiguous figures that they were "about freedom".[6] Guston himself appears to have called such figures "meta-objects":[7] in creating them, he would start drawing some object and then change, led by the shape that the image was taking.

5. Philip Guston, *Monument*, 1976

[4] Some works of conceptual art that use language are also relevantly similar to the case in hand. Cf. also discussion of Kiki Smith's *Untitled* in section 14 below.

[5] I am indebted to Owen Hulatt for this suggestion.

[6] Mayer [1997], 157.

[7] John Seed reports this label from Bill Berkson, author of a poem, "Mazurki", after which Guston named one of his drawings; cf. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-seed/mazurki-the-multiple-mean_b_799875.html.

6. Philip Guston, *Painter's Forms no 2*, 1978

4. Music offers many instances of what can be *prima facie* understood as non-representational art.[8] Its non-representational character goes a long way towards explaining the paucity of instances of disgusting music. The ideational nature and object-centricity of disgust combine to make, as a general rule, representations necessary for disgust elicitation. One example that is explicitly linked to disgust is Gustav Mahler's so-called 'cry of disgust' passage—in the 3rd movement of his *Symphony no 2* [1895]. However, the passage is a piece of pure instrumental music and no part of it is (physically) disgusting. If a connection can be made between the response appropriate to the music and disgust, then it is a connection that concerns moral, rather than physical disgust. In fact, as Martha Nussbaum [2004] reports Mahler's own intentions, quoting his own words:

> the idea [behind the passage] is that of looking at "the bustle of existence," the shallowness and herdlike selfishness of society, until it "becomes horrible to you, like the swaying of dancing figures in

[8] Here I will generally not consider ensembles of lyrics and music in songs, operas and similar art forms and genres, which have an obvious and essential representational aspect.

> a brightly-lit ballroom, into which you look from the dark night outside....Life strikes you as meaningless, a frightful ghost, from which you perhaps start away with a cry of disgust."[9]

A more properly disgusting example is the bass singer's belch about three minutes in to Luciano Berio's *A-ronne per 8 voci* [1975].[10] However disgusting this belching *sound* may be, and although it is part of a musical piece it is not what is traditionally classified as non-representational *music*. Instead, it is a straightforward instance of representation or presentation of the disgusting. Revealingly, Berio says of his own work that it is "[s]trictly speaking [...] not a musical composition", but rather a "documentary", or perhaps "theatre of the ears".[11]

As far as music in a stricter sense is concerned, the little experimental research that exists confirms the common-sensical assumption that I have made, i.e. that disgust is a difficult emotion to express musically.[12] Both Kari Kallinen [2005] and Christine Mohn [2011] found that disgust is the hardest of the six basic emotions to attribute to pieces of music. Their two articles report experiments in which subjects are asked to associate passages of music to one of the six basic emotions or to their characteristic facial expressions. The first study used excerpts from actual works in the Classical music canon, while the second employed custom-made music clips in the Western tonal tradition.

The convergence of results between the two studies is important and reas-

[9] Nussbaum [2004], 104, quoting from Mahler's Letter to Max Marschalk, as reported in Deryck Cooke's *Gustav Mahler*, Cambridge University Press, 1980.
[10] Thanks to Manos Panayiotakis for suggesting this example to me.
[11] http://www.lucianoberio.org/node/1420?1747386730=1.
[12] Cf. Korsmeyer [2011], 57 for a converging statement of this assumption.

suring, although of course further confirmation and investigation is desirable. Especially interesting would be to leave subjects freer to attribute emotions to music without forcing them to choose one-to-one correspondences within a predefined set of candidate emotions. Mohn [2011] acknowledges the limitations of the forced-choice experimental setting, especially with regard to the emotions that were harder to classify, like disgust. They speculate that the setting of their study "may have led to higher recognition rates" for these emotions.[13] In fact, although I am inclined to believe that they are right on this, there is also the possibility that, within a more liberal experimental setting, subjects may choose disgust as a secondary emotion of certain musical passages. This may actually lead to increased recognition rates for disgust, although only as a secondary affective response.

Of course, these studies may simply show a poor choice of musical passages on the experimenters' part, when it comes to disgust. The Classical music pieces selected for testing in Kallinen [2005] are all peculiar in featuring an undulating of sounds that evokes a sense of destabilization, almost nausea. They are Robert Schumann's *Piano Concerto in A Minor* [1845], Jean Sibelius's *En Saga* [1892] and Part I of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* [1913]. These passages seem rather far from being disgusting, although they may cause uneasiness or discomfiture. However, I suspect the choice in this case could not be much better. The pieces were selected on the basis of recommendations made by 50 music experts (teachers and professionals). As Kallinen [2005] says, disgust just "is an emotion that is seldom expressed in western art music".[14]

[13] Mohn [2011], 514.
[14] Kallinen [2005], 386. Although the descriptive generalization is plausible, the explanation that follows

The Mohn [2011] study is interesting especially because it extends Kallinen's study to custom-made music pieces. This affords it a chance to overcome any art-historical limitations in testing the existence and features of (actually) disgusting music. The pieces that were tested in the study were: a 5-second violin piece of "'Schreeching' [*sic*], medium volume, several variations with changing expression and emphasis", a 5-second cello piece involving "Uncontrolled tones in rapid succession, ascending and descending movements", and a 3-second electric bass clip characterized by "Weak touch, subdued timbre, slow tempo, low volume, diminuendo".[15]

The violin piece achieved a recognition rate of about 70%, which is fairly high even compared to easily attributable emotions such as joy and sadness. The other two pieces however brought the disgust-recognition mean down to about 42% (the lowest of all six emotions). The violin sample is importantly different from the other two in that it is much less non-representational than the others: it sounds much like some loud farting. This suggests that music can disgust, but only insofar as it is perceived as reproducing or representing something disgusting.[16]

5. Artworks that involve actually presenting, as opposed to representing, their subject matter are usually grouped under the categories of installation,

it is less satisfactory: "because music has traditionally been composed for enjoyment, aesthetic pleasure and practical purposes, such as masses, funerals and festivals" (Kallinen [2005], 386). Although historical reasons are likely to be an important part of the explanatory story, this particular historical explanation stands in need of much greater scrutiny. Amongst the puzzling questions left unanswered are the following. Even accepting the non-trivial claim that disgusting music cannot be a source of aesthetic pleasure, were there really no practical purposes to which the creation or performance of disgusting music could be put? If this was so, might such an absence not have been due to disgust's lack of aesthetic appeal? If so, the latter would actually be the real, deeper reason for the lack of disgusting music. Moreover, is the case of music different from that of other art forms? There is a lot of disgustingness in painting and sculpture in the Western tradition. Were there any differences in the traditional purposes served by these art forms and by music?

[15] Mohn [2011], 507.

[16] I am grateful to Christine Mohn for help in gathering the original data concerning this study.

performance (understood as including dance and theatre) and mixed-media art. Examples of such "presentational art" that involve the disgusting are particularly widespread in contemporary art. The most important part of such work is included in the set of works that Arthur Danto labels "the intractable avant-garde".[17] According to Danto's story, this is the art that, beginning from the early Twentieth century, with movements such as Dada and artists like Marcel Duchamp, understood art as a reaction to a traditional conception of art as essentially trafficking in beauty. This intractable avant-garde art, by contrast, sought to present to its audiences what was previously thought un-presentable. A significant part of the formerly unpresentable was constituted by disgusting subjects. Within this ambit, and alongside more traditional representational work, there have been clamorous and often controversial pieces of what I have called "presentational art".

An early such work was Piero Manzoni's series of 90 tin cans labelled in four languages and numbered. The content of the cans, one can only assume, is what the label says: "Artist's Shit/ 30 gr net/ freshly preserved/ produced and tinned/ in May 1961".[18] Whatever the actual content of the cans is, the work is disgusting because of what the cans purport to contain. What Manzoni's work is arguably supposed to call its audience's attention to is, among other things, the quasi-holy status of the artist in the post-Duchamp art-world. A sort of King Midas or a Jesus-as-Healer, whatever the artist gets in touch with, becomes art. His own faeces are no exception.

[17] See Danto [2003], especially Ch. 2

[18] Agostino Bonalumi, a collaborator of Manzoni's, famously stated in 2007 that Manzoni's cans contained just plaster.

7. Piero Manzoni, *Artist's Shit*, 1961 (photograph of can)

More recent examples of this kind of work can be found in the productions of members of the so-called "young British art" movement. With reference to one such work, Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years* [1990], Danto says:

> Someone told me that she found beauty in the maggots infesting the severed and seemingly putrescent head of a cow, set in a glass display case by the young British artist Damien Hirst. It gives me a certain kind of wicked pleasure to imagine Hirst's frustration if hers were the received view. He intended that it be found disgusting. . . [19]

Now, I find Danto's polarization between disgust and beauty too rough to be useful: (physical) disgust is a fairly well-defined as well as descriptive notion, whereas beauty is neither well-defined nor purely descriptive. Moreover, I think there is something in the widespread appeal of Hirst's work in general (as well as of *A Thousand Years* in particular) that has something

[19] Danto [2003], 49–50.

importantly to do with a kind of neatness of presentation that, if one were a fan of the artistic value of Hirst's work (as I am not), I suspect one might be tempted to call 'beauty'. Nonetheless, Danto has a point.

8. Damien Hirst, *A Thousand Years*, 1990 (photograph of installation)

Whatever additional qualities Hirst's piece might have, it crucially depends for its intended artistic effect on the disgust it so forcefully embodies. Any artistic value that the work has as a whole either depends on that disgust or cannot be attributed to it without taking that disgust into account.[20]

The conclusion that the considerations above warrant is that art that presents the disgusting cannot fail to be disgusting. There certainly is the case of the presentation of something disgusting which is also, in a sense, hidden to the audience. This is the case of a work of performance art such as Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* [1971]. In this work, visitors to the Sonnabend Gallery in New York were presented with the voice coming out of loud-

[20] Cf. for instance the kind of sympathetic account of the yBa movement offered by Kieran Cashell [2009].

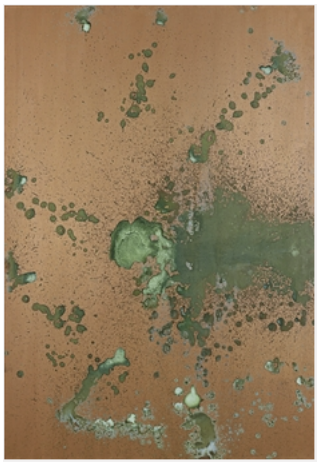
speakers of (what reportedly was) the artist, hidden under the gallery floor masturbating, whilst he described his sexual fantasies out loud. But this work is still disgusting, and clearly meant to be so. By contrast, I surmise, a piece that completely hid its disgusting content from its audience would not count as *presentation* of the disgusting.

Another potential counter-example to my conclusion is Andy Warhol's series of "oxidation paintings" and "piss paintings".[21] Executed mainly between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, these paintings exhibit a characteristic visual style. This style is the consequence of various execution techniques, somewhat different one from the other, but all having in common urine staining and a subsequent process of oxidation or other similar chemical alteration. Basically, the painting would go through a stage of being urinated on, often by one of Warhol's friends or acquaintances. Now, a wrinkle of disgust may certainly be caused by knowledge of the origin of the stain spots visible in the paintings. However, such disgust may be counteracted by the knowledge of the chemical process that that urine was through. This knowledge should make urine fall out of the list of disgust elicitors, as it is oxidated urine.[22] As I mentioned in Chapter 2, although disgust is object-centric, sometimes what may be called the same object is not so in terms of disgust's sensitivity. A non-disgusting object (e.g. a book) may become disgusting by being thrown into the rubbish can, and hence becoming (part of) a different object, i.e. rubbish. Vice versa, a disgusting object can become non-disgusting, as I suggest happens in the

[21] For instance, *Oxidation Painting* [1978] and *Basquiat* [1982].

[22] Urine is already low on many people's disgust sensitivity. Moreover, it is also often a disgust elicitor for which the possibility of cleansing, as well as cleansing procedures, are in place from early on in ontogenesis (especially as part of toilet training).

case of Warhol's oxidated urine.[23] Moreover, there is the issue of whether consideration of the method of production of Warhol's paintings should be part of a correct appreciation of them (given that Warhol did not include any reference to it either in the paintings or in their titles).



9. Andy Warhol, *Oxidation Painting*, 1978

10. Andy Warhol, *Basquiat*, 1982

6. I now turn to representational art. In this respect, I will consider three

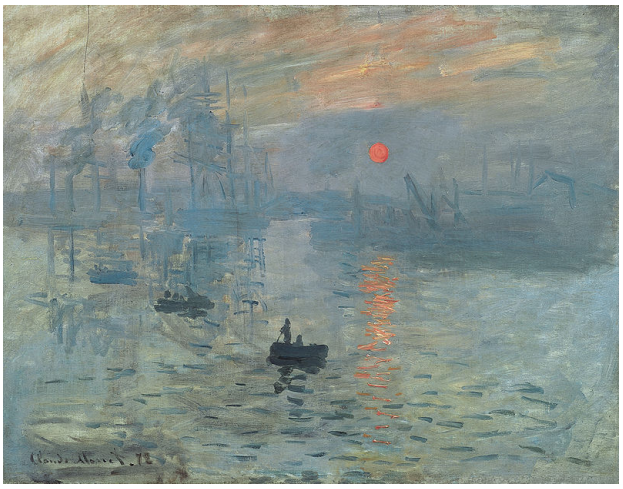
[23] Naturally, this does not always happen. Cf. Chapter 2 for a case in point, i.e. Rozin and colleagues' experiments involving cockroaches in juice and chocolate shaped as turds.

categories. The first category groups together representations of the disgusting that are not disgusting. The second category is the converse of the first: to it belong disgusting representations of what is typically non-disgusting. The third and final category is constituted by disgusting representations of the disgusting.

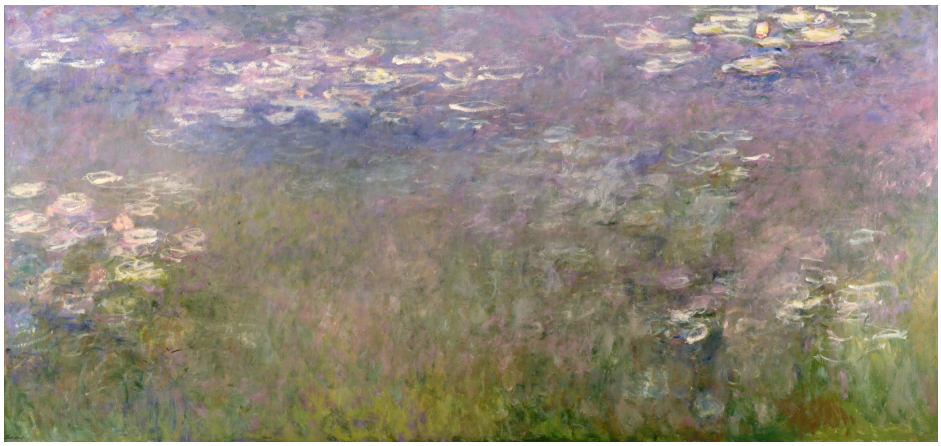
Under the first category fall those representations of disgusting things that are executed in such a way as to be non-disgusting. Eighteenth-century authors such as Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant, and, under their influence, more recently, authors like Carolyn Korsmeyer and Arthur Danto, suggest that (realistic) representations of the disgusting cannot but be disgusting. But in fact, as I also suggest in Chapter 3, the issue is not so clear. The eighteenth-century authors' emphasis on the notion of *mimesis* provides reason to consider the original eighteenth-century view as restricted to realistic representations.

It is important to distinguish between realistic and non-realistic representations. Of course, the distinction between realistic and non-realistic representations seems difficult to draw without leaving an ample area of borderline cases. Is Monet's early work *Impression, Sunrise* [1872] a realistic painting? Are his later *Water Lilies* [1920–6] (painted when he was old and almost completely blind) still realistic? I would be inclined to answer 'yes' in both cases, at least for present purposes. What of Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* [1907] or *Guernica* [1937]?[24] These seem to me to be better described as non-realistic. Still, the difference between the Monets and the Picassos is not so stark.

[24] I discuss *Guernica* in some more detail in Chapter 3.



11. Claude Monet, *Impression, Sunrise*, 1872



12. Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*, 1920–6 (detail)

13. Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907

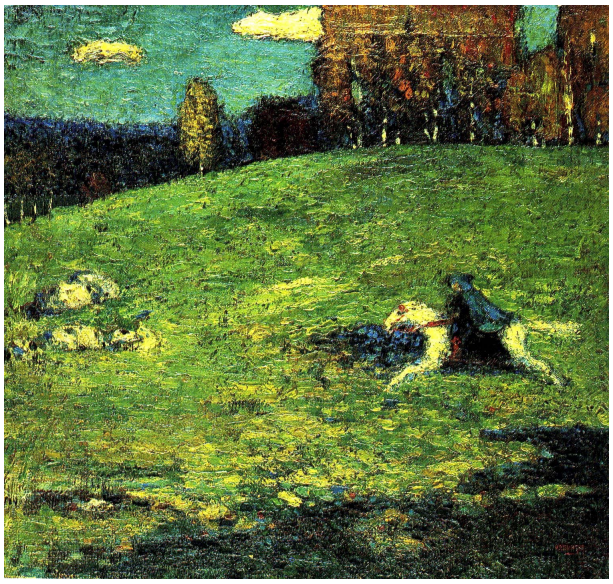
Additional doubts about the distinction between realistic and non-realistic representations concern the nature of representations. Consider again Picasso. Is it meaningful to say that his *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* represent a group of five naked girls posing, and *Guernica* a massacre of men and animals? Again, I am inclined to say that it does. A considerable part of the point of Picasso's painting those two paintings lies in their being representations of those two subjects (as is indicated by, among other things, their titles and history of composition).

Of course what is represented is sometimes difficult to ascertain with precision. For instance one of Picasso's *demoiselles* seems to be battling with a white sheet on her left leg. Is it a bed-sheet, a négligée, or a piece of white canvas, or something else? Of course, this may not be relevant to the Picasso piece from the point of view of its appreciation.

But at other times an uncertainty is more clearly present in the appreci-

ation, or even in the artist's aims. Such is arguably the case of Kandinsky's *The Blue Rider* [1903]. This painting depicts a horse galloping across a grassy hill. Riding the horse—art critics are divided—are one or two people; the second rider could be the first rider's shadow instead. As one art magazine says, the uncertainty is in fact an "intentional disjunction, allowing viewers to participate in the creation of the artwork [which] would become an increasingly conscious technique used by Kandinsky in subsequent years [and] culminating in the (often nominally) abstract works of the 1911–1914 period".[25] In fact, the "horse and rider [. . .] was for him a symbol for moving beyond realistic representation"[26] and his 1903 painting went on to give its name to an influential movement of artists calling for a shift of art towards abstraction (*Der Blaue Reiter*). If the account reported above is correct, Kandinsky *intentionally* plays on the ambiguity of representation. Problems and ambiguities notwithstanding, the distinction between realistic and non-realistic representations seems to me on the whole useful. I will show that it is by applying it to what follows.

[25] http://arttatler.com/archivevasilykandinsky.html.
[26] http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/ge/styles/blaue_reiter.



14. Wassily Kandinsky, *The Blue Rider*, 1903

The question is: are there representations of disgusting things that are not disgusting? If one considers *non-realistic* representations in the sense suggested, then the answer is yes. Indeed, one example is the aforementioned *Guernica*. Picasso's painting represents the bloody massacre of the population of the Basque town of Guernica, bombed by German and Italian war planes during the Spanish Civil War. In the painting one recognizes beheadings and dismemberments of men and animals. Thus the subject matter has disgusting elements; but the representations themselves clearly are not disgusting.

7. Non-realistic representations of the disgusting can also be disgusting. A case in point is Bill Woodrow's bronze sculpture *Point of Entry* [1989]. The sculpture gave its name to an exhibition of sculptures commissioned to Woodrow by the Imperial War Museum in London.[27] The sculpture is a non-

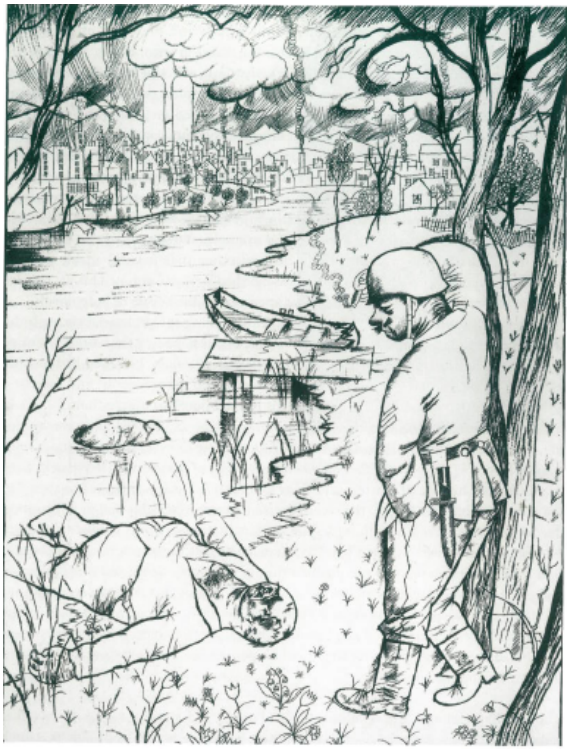
[27] Cf. http://www.billwoodrow.com/dev/texts.php?page=2&text_id=6.

realistic, almost abstract representation of the blood and innards coming out of a wound. The visceral body material twists to spell the words 'Mum' and 'Dad'. This is a monument to the young soldiers who were killed in countless British wars, such as those documented and celebrated in the Imperial War Museum. Although *Point of Entry* is overall an even less realistic artwork than *Guernica*, and it can hardly be considered as a potently disgusting work, it does nonetheless warrant a *frisson* of disgust. Correctly understood as a depiction of what it is a depiction of, it is disgusting. This is due in large part to the dark colour and stylized rendering of the trail of body material snaking its way on the floor. Simplicity and lack of detail make for a convincing embodiment of the idea of body innards coming out of a wound. Although overall a less realistic piece, Woodrow's sculpture ends up being more disgusting than *Guernica*.

15. Bill Woodrow, *Point of Entry*, 1989 (photograph of installation)

More realistic than Picasso's or Woodrow's pieces, albeit highly sketchy, is neo-expressionist artist George Grosz's black-and-white lithograph *Quitting Time* [1919]. It also denounces the horrors of war but is not disgusting. In fact, the disfigured face of the soldier lying on the floor should be a pretty

disgusting sight if there is one, but it is not in Grosz's depiction. Here again, colour, or lack thereof, makes a crucial difference. Another instance of this is the (even more realistic, although still highly stylized) illustration of Salome holding John the Baptist's head [1894], by Aubrey Beardsley.[28] Colour is an important factor in the artistic expression of disgustingness, often as much as, or even more than *disegno*, or style narrowly construed.

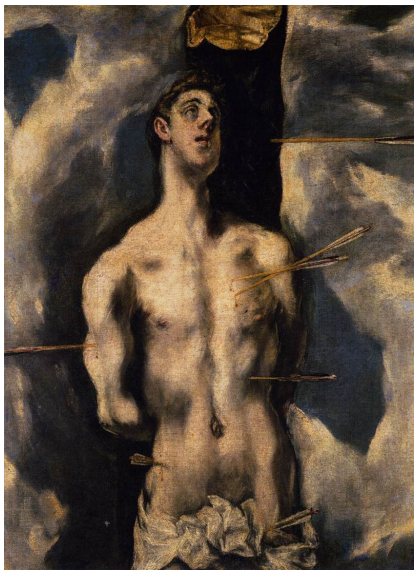


16. George Grosz, *Quitting Time*, 1919

8. Now, representing disgusting subjects in a determinately *realistic* fashion is difficult to accomplish without the artwork being disgusting as a result. There certainly are works that manifest the artist's skill in picturing what may look like perfectly realistic images of pretty disgusting things, but in

[28] One of his famous illustrations to Oscar Wilde's first English edition of *Salome*.

a way that is much less disgusting than the subject and realistic rendering would seem to allow. But this typically happens by way of a decline of realistic accuracy. A case in point are some Renaissance representations of St Sebastian's martyrdom. El Greco's *St Sebastian* [1620–5] represents the saint as an ethereal and attractive cloud-man. Arrows transfix him like pins in puffs of smoke. Similarly, Guido Reni's *St Sebastian* [1615] is a bit of a pin-up figure, even more physically attractive than the El Greco. And, although the Reni is more realistically portrayed, it shares the El Greco's stylized, comics-like depiction of the saint's arrow wounds. Further back in time, the St Sebastian in the central panel of Hans Holbein's *Triptych of St Sebastian* [1516] is perhaps more realistically portrayed than either of his successors. But, still, the arrows piercing his body continue to leave almost no blood or otherwise gory traces of their working.



17. Doménikos Theotokópoulos (aka El Greco), *St Sebastian*, 1620–5

18. Guido Reni, *St Sebastian*, 1615

19. Hans Holbein, *Triptych of St Sebastian*, 1516 (central panel)

Even further towards realism is the case of a work by one of the most celebrated masters of realism. Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* [1598–9] is not completely non-disgusting. Yet the spray of blood erupting

from Holofernes's sliced neck is not as disgusting as one would expect, given the subject and the realistic style of the painting. It does so by a converse mechanism to that at work in Woodrow's sculpture. Realistic style notwithstanding, in fact, that spray of blood is far from being true to life. That stain of red almost does not look as if it depicts a liquid substance at all. It almost resembles nothing more than a stain of red: a few straight thin brushes of red painted across Holofernes's left shoulder and over his bed pillow and sheets. Again, as a rule, avoiding the disgusting can be done, but at the expense of realism.

20. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1598–9

9. Although she agrees on this general rule, Carole Talon-Hugon [2003] offers what she takes to be a counterexample to (an unqualified version of) the rule: Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin's *La Raie* [1725–6]. According to Talon-Hugon, Chardin's painting is remarkable in that it avoids being disgusting, at the same time as it achieves the highest degree of realism.[29] I do not agree with Talon-Hugon's analysis, but *La Raie* is a case that is

[29] See Talon-Hugon [2003], 113ff.

worth discussing.

21. Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin, *La Raie*, 1725–6

Chardin's painting, now hosted at the Louvre in Paris, has almost always received positive critical appreciation in France. An early work of his, it allowed him, together with *Le Buffet* [1728], to be admitted into the prestigious French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture (in 1728). It has been celebrated by, among others, such French cultural giants as Denis Diderot, Marcel Proust and Henri Matisse.[30]

Talon-Hugon in fact claims that *La Raie*'s critical recognition is "not frequent [and] doubly paradoxical".[31] The reason for this, she suggests, is that it challenged two artistic master-rules, valid at least in the Eighteenth century: the discredit for still life, the least valuable of the genres, and the avoidance of the disgusting.

Talon-Hugon is to a good extent correct here, although it should be borne in mind that Chardin's painting is a still life only atypically. Like its com-

[30] Diderot discusses it in his *Salon* of 1763 (see Diderot [1759–81/1975]); the young Proust writes about it in an essay written around 1895 and published posthumously (see Proust [ca1895/2009]); Henri Matisse admired Chardin greatly and made copies of some of his paintings, including this one (in 1896).
[31] Talon-Hugon [2003], 114; my translation.

panion piece, *Le Buffet*, it features a live animal presence: a cat (*Le Buffet* has a dog). The Louvre website even calls it a ""false" still life".[32] Moreover, *La Raie* was painted a few decades earlier than the Neo-classical revolution, in resonance with which the banning of disgusting art was felt most deeply. To mention a couple of landmarks of Neo-classicism, the Pompeii excavations, emblem of the archaeological renaissance of the age, started around 1740, and Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* was published in 1764.

Nonetheless, *La Raie* is certainly an arresting painting. What about Talon-Hugon's contention that it eschews disgust through its very realism? Is the painting disgusting? Is it realistic? Echoing Diderot's remarks on the painting,[33] Talon-Hugon claims:

> The disgust felt before a gutted skate is very real: such a disgust is represented in the attitude of the cat portrayed in the painting: stiffened, bristly, mewing, its attitude expresses all the violence of a response of repulsion. However, here the representation saves the represented. The success of the painting lies in its perfectly satisfying this criterion of excellence: illusionism of representation. So here the painting's fidelity compensates and, in fact, effaces the revulsion caused by the subject represented.[34]

This, Talon-Hugon says, is a "paradoxical" feat that Chardin accomplishes in the painting. However, it is unclear how Chardin is supposed to manage this feat. Talon-Hugon says he does this by means of his painterly talent: "it

[32] http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/skate.
[33] The reading of Diderot's remarks on the subject is actually less straightforward than Talon-Hugon assumes: see Tunstall [2006].
[34] Talon-Hugon [2003], 114; my translation.

cannot but be the talent".[35] However, the only (hint at an) explanation that she offers as to how this happens is to appeal to an analogy. The paradox that arises from Chardin's talent is like "the paradox of *trompe-l'œil*: if [the painting] succeeds, then it fails (if the thing represented gets confused with the thing itself, then what is seen is not the painting)".[36]

Suggestive as it is, the analogy with *trompe-l'œil* is misleading. The master of *trompe-l'œil* is so good at illusionism/realism that the representation ceases to be perceived as such and she ceases to be appreciated as an artist. In the case of *La Raie*, Chardin is (supposedly) so good at realism that the representation fails to achieve the feat of disgusting its audience. In other words, whatever it consists in, Chardin's mastery does quite the opposite of hiding itself.

Although the analogy with *trompe-l'œil* is unhelpful, an understanding of Chardin as a proto-hyper-realist might be more promising. The thought here would be that the pursuit of realism can be pushed too far, where the illusion of reality is lost—and disgustingness with it. This would be a coherent explanation of *La Raie*'s "paradoxical" emotional effects, but it would not necessarily shed a positive light on Chardin's realistic painterly skills. It is not implausible that hyper-realism is in many instances a failure of realism, rather than its excellence. Although, of course, this too is debatable, fortunately there is no need to go into this debate here. Chardin's painting, as I see it, is in fact *not* an instance of extraordinary realism or a proto-instance of hyper-realism.

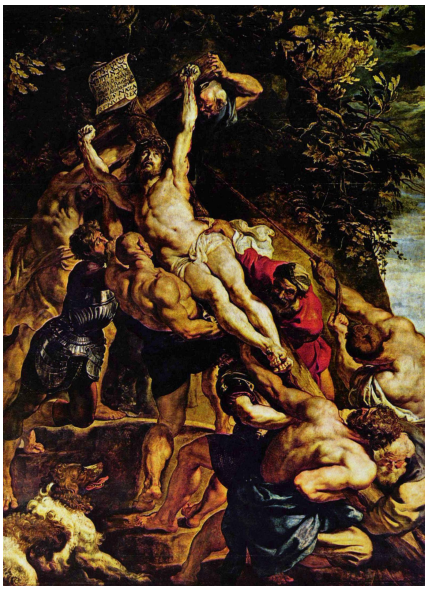
Although by epoch Chardin was late-Baroque, he worked to a great extent

[35] Talon-Hugon [2003], 114; my translation.
[36] Talon-Hugon [2003], 114–5; my translation.

on the model of such Flemish Baroque painters as Frans Snyders and Jan Fyt, to whom he was immediately compared.[37] Like his Flemish Baroque predecessors, he certainly was more realistically inclined than some of his contemporaries. At the same time, however, he can only too simplistically be described as a master of realism. Compared to the Dutch "Golden Age" masters, Flemish Baroque painters were less interested in realistic, matter-of-fact depiction than the former. Still within the boundaries of realism, they often overcame them. They, as it were, allowed their brushes to elaborate on interesting features of their subjects, quite apart from the requirements of naturalistic fidelity. Compare for instance a Rembrandt to a Rubens, e.g. the former's *Raising of the Cross* [1633] to the latter's *Elevation of the Cross* [1610–1].

22. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Raising of the Cross*, 1633

[37] See http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/skate.



23. Peter Paul Rubens, *Elevation of the Cross*, 1610–1

To be sure, Chardin's work is not quite as ebullient as Rubens's, but it does show signs of affinity with Baroque sensibility. An enlightening comparison is that between *La Raie* and Rembrandt's *Carcass of Beef* [1657]. This comparison shows the great difference between Rembrandt's realistic rendering of the carcass of beef (disgustingness and all) and Chardin's more liberal portrayal of the skate, as well as, to some extent, of the cat meowing on the table. Whereas in the former the meat, sinews and fat of the beef are soberly delineated, giving an impression of a solid, real presence, the latter follows a less careful and more imaginative line. Chardin's skate is more sketchily drawn, as well as more varied in colour—so much so that it defies credibility. The cat next to it is also sketchily drawn, more of a peluche toy than a real cat—or a grainy videogame picture of a cat, given that it is (again, sketchily) portrayed in movement.[38]

[38] I discuss Rembrandt's painting further in Chapter 3.

In other words, there is no "paradox of realism" in Chardin's *La Raie*: much more simply, its lack of, or diminished disgustingness is to be explained by the less-than-perfect realism of the depiction. And, in fact, another apologist of Chardin's painting, albeit one further from Neo-classical allegiances than Diderot, described very aptly the imaginative, fantastic world that the painting actually evokes:

> above you a *strange monster*, still fresh as the sea where it gushed, a skate is suspended, the sight of which combines the desire of gluttony with the curious charm of the sea's calm or of its storms, of which it was the formidable witness [...] It is open and you can admire the beauty of its vast and delicate architecture, tinged with red blood, blue sinews and white muscles, *like the nave of a polychrome cathedral*. Next to it, in the abandonment of their death, fish are twisted into a rigid and hopeless curve, their belly flat, their eyes out. Then a cat, *superimposed* onto this aquarium...[39]

10. A somewhat odd case with respect to the realism/non-realism distinction is Gilbert & George's series of microscopic photographs of bodily substances, such as *Piss on Piss* [1996], *Piss on Blood* [1996] or *Spunk on Sweat* [1997]. These are images of bodily fluids as they really look under the microscope (although subsequently hand-dyed by the artists). These pictures do not show us these bodily fluids as they normally look to most of us. In fact, in the artists' intentions, they are meant to manifest unexpected majesty and beauty. In their words,

[39] Proust [ca1895/2009], 375–6; my emphases and translation (from <http://www.pedagogie.ac-nantes.fr/90343341/0/fiche___ressourcepedagogique/&RH=1330704622823>).

> Out of these drops of blood come stained-glass windows from fourteenth-century cathedrals, or Islamic writing [...] To see daggers and medieval swords in sweat: that's our aim. In piss you find pistols, flowers, crucifixes. Spunk amazes us... it really does look like a crown of thorns.[40]

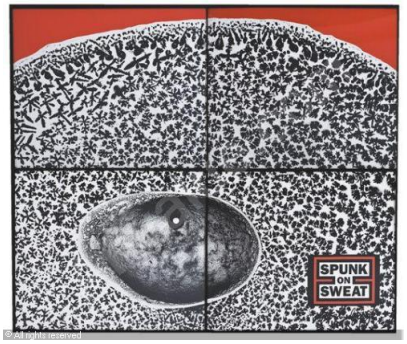
Although almost completely real to their subjects, Gilbert & George's microscopic pictures are difficult to label as 'realistic'. Nonetheless, they are still somewhat disgusting. What makes them disgusting is our *knowing* that they are, in effect, microscopic photographs of bodily fluids. This knowledge makes them disgusting by, as it were, creeping into the pictures.[41] The Gilbert & George and Serrano cases are consequences of disgust's ideational character. Moreover, what these cases do is to weaken, or at least further qualify the positive correlation between realism and disgustingness of representations.

24. Gilbert & George, *Piss on Piss*, 1996

[40] http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/gilbert-george/gilbert-george-major-exhibition-room-guide/gilbert-11.

[41] Of course, there may certainly be people (doctors for instance) for whom a microscopic image of, say, urine will not be disgusting even with the relevant knowledge. However, there is reason to expect fewer outliers in this case than in Warhol's oxidation painting case. Here, the kind of habituation that is likely to be needed is bound to be available for a niche category of people. Cf. also earlier on in this chapter and Chapter 2.

25. Gilbert & George, *Piss on* Blood, 1996



26. Gilbert & George, *Spunk on Sweat*, 1997

11. Another consequence of the ideational character of disgust is that literature is not much more hospitable than the visual arts to instances of non-disgusting representations of disgusting things. This is not of course to deny that the degree of disgustingness may on average be higher in the visual arts than in literature. The two principal reasons for this latter generalization are, first, that visual representations, when compared to verbal ones, make it easier and more immediate, *ceteris paribus*, to recognize and imagine objects (as opposed to situations). Since disgust is object-centric in the way discussed in Chapter 2, this makes visual representations especially prone to being disgusting. Secondly, visual representations afford a much greater sense of presence of the disgust elicitor to an audience than verbal

ones.

Some would disagree with my generalization, whilst agreeing with the principle behind my explanation.[42] Johann Adolf Schlegel [1751/9], who started the attack on disgust in eighteenth-century German-speaking circles, says: "The most well-rendered depiction of an unclean old woman emphasizing more her repulsive than her ridiculous side will elicit a horror—whether or not in painting, I won't dare say, but certainly in poetry [...] The more imitation succeeds in arriving at the truth—the more accurately and powerfully the disgusting features gain expression—the more violently do they revolt us."[43] Before Johann Adolf, his brother Johann Elias Schlegel [1745/1965] is even more explicit: "[Disgust] is a sensation aroused far more by describing a disgusting object in detail than by looking at it. And I confess that I would rather see an ugly old woman than read a detailed description of her [...] A painter may depict more disgusting objects than a poet, because an exact description of something disgusting is far more unpleasant than a vicarious viewing of it."[44]

I agree with the Schlegels that accuracy is key in this respect. Moreover, on the production side, pictures can more easily fail to be accurate than verbal descriptions, in the sense that, again, on average and *ceteris paribus*, making an accurate picture requires greater skill than verbally describing, or simply naming disgusting objects or features.[45] However, I suspect that the Schlegels overestimate the power of a reader's mind to imagine or call

[42] As mentioned in Chapter 1, Lessing [1766/1962] instead agrees with me on the generalization, although he does not elaborate on the explanation, claiming merely that the disgusting is diminished "by being expressed in words" (Chapter XXV).
[43] Schlegel [1751/9], 111; as cited in Menninghaus [2003].
[44] Schlegel [1745/1965], 45.
[45] Photographic or cinematic pictures of actual, real-life disgusting objects are of course an exception in this respect.

to mind detailed mental images of objects from memory. Note that this is a point about power, not control. I do not deny that a reader has more control (than a viewer) over her degree of imaginative engagement with a verbal (vs visual) representation. Nonetheless, once the appropriate imaginative engagement is deployed, the competent reader cannot be presumed to have so powerful a visual imagination to compete with the viewer of a comparably accurate visual representation. Moreover, one should not neglect that the visual typically suggests a much stronger sense of immediate presence of the disgust elicitor than the verbal ever can.

The point that really matters for my purposes here is however independent of the latter comparative claim concerning degree of disgustingness. The important point is that literature is not significantly better than the visual arts in hiding disgustingness (i.e. representing the disgusting as non-disgusting). Again, this is a direct consequence of the ideational view of disgust that I defend in this thesis.

However, a writer, like a visual artist, has the possibility to heighten or tone down the disgustingness of a scene. An instance of the latter is Dante's description of the Furies when he imagines encountering them in Canto IX of the *Inferno*. Dante stops paying attention to the words of his infernal chaperon Virgil:

> And more he said, but not in mind I have it; Because mine eye had altogether drawn me Tow'rds the high tower with the red-flaming summit, Where in a moment saw I swift uprisen The three infernal Furies stained with blood, Who had the limbs of women and their mien, And with the greenest hydras were begirth; Small serpents and cerastes were their tresses, Wherewith their horrid temples

were entwined.[46]

The horrid scene is described realistically but in outline; Dante does not dwell on its disgusting details. The dignified language (even more prominent in the original Italian)[47] also helps to tone down the disgustingness of the scene. But it still is not sufficient to make it non-disgusting, given the content of the scene and the realism with which it is presented.

12. By contrast, and although it can be disgusting, sculpture (and bas-relief) is often prone to hide (partially or completely) the disgustingness of its subjects. This is evident in such a stylized and, in a sense, primitive bas-relief as the *Perseus Slitting Medusa's Throat* [ca 540 BCE] from the metope of the Temple of Selinunte in Sicily. But it is also confirmed by a pinnacle of realistic virtuosity like Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus* [1545]. Although clotted blood and cerebral tissue dangle from Medusa's head, the viewer is somehow spared the degree of disgust that the corresponding real scene would typically warrant.

[46] Alighieri [ca1308–21/1877], lines 34–42.

[47] E altro disse, ma non l'ho a mente; / però che l'occhio m'avea tutto tratto ver' / l'alta torre a la cima rovente, / dove in un punto furon dritte / ratto tre furie infernal di sangue tinte, / che membra feminine avieno e atto, / e con idre verdissime eran cinte; / serpentelli e ceraste avien per crine, / onde le fiere tempie erano avvinte.

27. *Perseus Slitting Medusa's Throat*, ca 540 BCE (photograph of bas-relief)

28. Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus*, 1545 (photograph of sculpture)

This property of sculpture may seem counter-intuitive. Because of its tri-dimensionality one might assume that sculpture should come the closest to accurate imitation of nature when it comes to the mimetic arts. Kant seems to be following this train of thought when, in §48, he takes just sculpture

to support his exclusion of the disgusting from the "uglinesses" that can be made aesthetically pleasant in naturalistic art: "[t]he art of sculpture again, because in its products art is almost interchangeable with nature, excludes from its creations the immediate representation of ugly objects".[48] But, in fact, sculpture is among the least disgust-apt art forms, at least in the Western canon (as we standardly appreciate it). Why this should be is an interesting question.

My guess is that a combination of distinct factors is at work in affording sculpture this property. One factor is colour. Although not necessarily a black-and-white affair, most statues are not realistically coloured (at least not in the way we have standardly been able to view and appreciate them for the last handful of centuries). Colour plays a big part in realistic depiction, as already suggested, so it is *prima facie* plausible that the lack of realistic colouring hinders the disgustingness potential of most statues. Another factor is consistency of material. A lot, perhaps most disgusting substances are soft, flaccid; by contrast, many (or even most) statues are made of solid materials: marble, stones, bronze. No matter how skilled the sculptor might be, consistency will be evident, thus jarring with the usual association between disgustingness and flaccidity.

Some confirmation of the influence of the two factors above is provided by the greater disgustingness of coloured statues made with relatively soft materials. Consider for instance a contemporary (wax and beads) sculptural work such as Kiki Smith's *Pee Body* [1992]. While not even remotely comparable to the sculptural detail work proper to a Cellini, the disgust-

[48] Kant [1790/1978], §48.

ingness of Smith's piece is greatly enhanced by such simple devices as the yellowish colouring, and the impression of softness and fluidity provided by the work's constituent materials. Similar effects are achieved, by similar means, in anatomical *moulage* works. Created from materials like wax, rubber and latex, these works mainly serve (practical) purposes other than art appreciation, especially medical training ones. Their origin is attributed to Gaetano Zumbo, a Sicilian waxworker of the 17th century, who created curiosity works such as *The Plague* and *Wax Head* [1691–5] at the Medicean court in Florence, before moving on to using his quirky talents to anatomical ends in Paris.[49]

29a–b. Kiki Smith, *Pee Body*, 1992 (photograph of installation)

[49] Zumbo made famous head models, mostly kept in the Specola Museum in Florence and the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. Cf. Lemire [1993]; http://ahistoryblog.com/2013/03/12/gaetano-giulio-zummo-aka-zumbo-1656-1701-the-wax-man-cometh/; http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/758a1fb6-807a-11e2-aed5-00144feabdc0.html; http://io9.com/5952809/creepy-wax-anatomy-models-from-the-1700-1800s-apologies-if-you-planned-on-sleeping-tonight; and http://morbidanatomy.blogspot.co.uk.

30. Gaetano Giulio Zummo (aka Zumbo), *The Plague*, 1691–5 (photograph of wax model)

31. Gaetano Giulio Zummo (aka Zumbo), *Wax Head*, 1691–5 (photograph of wax model)

13. Across art forms, artworks with a sexual theme, even if highly realistic, can achieve the feat of, as it were, taking disgust out of the disgusting. As many have noted, sex often travels between the disgusting and the desirable and back.[50] Sometimes this circumstance is used to remarkable artistic effect in works such as Charles Demuth's watercolour painting of *Three Sailors*

[50] See for instance Miller [1998], ch. 6.

Urinating [ca 1930]. The painting, discovered in Demuth's apartment after his death, brims with homosexual sensuousness and makes the otherwise disgusting scene depicted intriguing to look at and almost titillating. At least in my judgement, the repulsion of disgust is imperceptible.

32. Charles Demuth, *Three Sailors Urinating*, ca 1930 (black-and-white reproduction)

Clearly, the artistic effect of Demuth's painting is not simply a result of the sexual theme. In particular, Demuth's mastery of the watercolour technique has a crucial role in combining innocence and sensuousness in the sailors' (almost choreographic) movements.[51] However, without the power characteristic of sexual imagery the effects on the viewer would be much different. I do not point this out because I mean to somehow diminish the value of the painting. Demuth's painting is far from being pornographic (even if it were, it would take a lot of persuasion to sway me from what I take

[51] As the art critic Ken Johnson, writing on *The New York Times*, says: "Search the history of American art and you will discover few watercolors more beautiful than those of Charles Demuth" (February 27th, 2008).

as the default assumption, i.e. that there is no in-principle incompatibility between pornography and good art).[52] I emphasize the role of sexual imagery in Demuth's achievement because it signals a very peculiar phenomenon as far as disgust elicitation is concerned. If it were not for the sexual theme, it would be much harder to induce a viewer not to feel disgust at the scene Demuth paints.[53] These effects, at any rate, depend mostly on the particular theme or subject matter involved. By contrast, they have little to do with the manner of representation. They are therefore of limited importance in the present categorization. Moreover, the victory over disgust (its "overcoming" as some call it)[54] that sexual imagery can achieve is rarely permanent and never universal. There will no doubt be people who will not find Demuth's painting as disgust-free as I do, and even I might find it disgusting the next time I consider it.

14. The converse category to the first is that of works that are disgusting even though they represent what is typically not disgusting. In an important passage of his *Laocoön*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing discusses a *Deposition* [1530] by the Italian Renaissance artist known as "Il Pordenone". In the painting, a woman masks her nose with a handkerchief, presumably to protect herself from the stench of Jesus's dead body. This, argues Lessing, irremediably damages the artistic quality of Pordenone's picture because:

> not only does actual stench, but even the very idea of it, awaken a feeling of disgust. We avoid places that stink, even when we have

[52] Cf. Kieran [2001].
[53] For a similar case to Demuth, but more realistic, cf. Serrano's *A History of Sex (Leo's Fantasy)* [1996].
[54] See e.g. Miller [1998], 113.

a cold.[55]

Although I agree with Lessing's general statement of the ideational nature of disgust, I do not find the specific example cogent evidence in its support. I just do not think there is anything disgusting in Pordenone's painting. The connection between the idea of something rotten (e.g. Jesus's body) is too remote from what is actually represented (i.e. at least twice removed causally and inferentially) to imbue the painting with any disgustingness. Perhaps this is also a consequence of the fact that the characters in it retain a good deal of the static figures typical of earlier, Medieval painting. A more vigorously depicted expression of disgust might have made a difference with respect to the painting's disgustingness.[56]

[55] Lessing [1766/1962], p. 137. I discuss this passage further in Chapter 1.
[56] Consider by contrast *The Flag of the Mad Mother* [15th or 16th century] (as in Eco [2011], 138), which is disgusting by less indirectly representing the object of disgust.

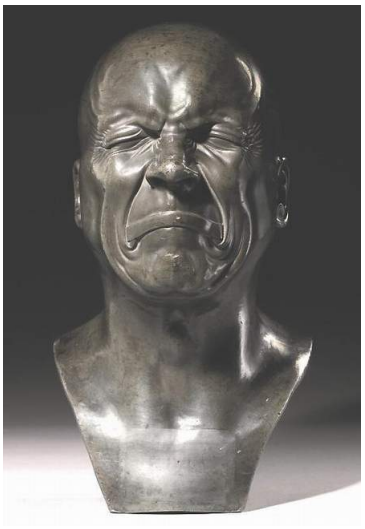
33. Giovanni Antonio de' Sacchis (aka Il Pordenone), *Deposition*, 1530

Nonetheless, there is a sense in which something like Pordenone's painting might be thought as disgusting. Expressions of basic emotions, including disgust, have been shown to elicit activation of the particular emotion's neurological centres. This is a particular instance of the well-documented evidence in support of the existence of so-called 'mirror neurons'. In this sense, for instance, seeing a picture of someone expressing disgust in the typical (Ekman-) face of disgust would not only trigger imitation of that facial expression, but a more complete mirror affective experience.[57] Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's *Character Heads* no 16 and no 18 [ca 1770–81] are

[57] See Wicker [2003].

pertinent instances of works of art in this respect. However, it would be overall misleading to categorize such cases in the class of disgusting art. What Messerschmidt's busts warrant is not disgust, but, at most, an experience that shares some, but not all, of the features of disgust. For instance, the relevant mirror experience would not be intentionally directed at the busts themselves or at the heads they represent—at least not in the sense in which disgust is intentionally directed at something disgusting. Moreover, and consequently, one would not have any hesitation to touch either the busts or the heads.

34. Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, *Character Head no 16*, ca 1770–81 (photograph of sculpture)



35. Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, *Character Head no 1*8, ca 1770–81 (photograph of sculpture)

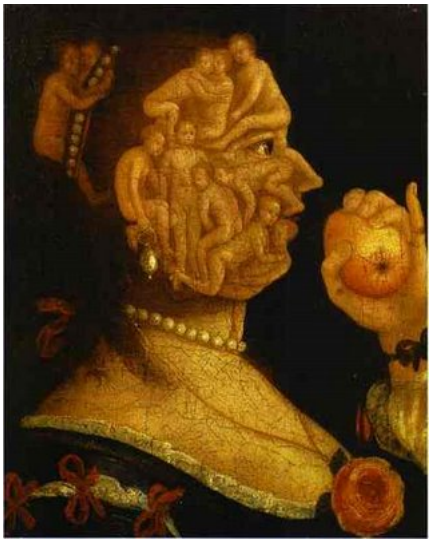
Another candidate for inclusion in the category of disgusting representations of the non-disgusting is Kiki Smith's *Untitled* [1987–90]. This is a collection of twelve glass jars, looking like the jars that were used in old pharmacies to keep medicinal oils and essences. Smith's jars are empty, but each of them is labelled with the name of a bodily fluid: "semen", "mucus", "vomit", "blood", "saliva" etc. This is a more convincing example for the ideational nature of disgust than Pordenone's *Deposition*. One looks at Smith's jars with the expectation to see inside them the content that they promise, and this is enough to make the work disgusting. However, this example has the problem that it uses names of disgusting substances. In a sense, then, the work involves representations of the disgusting, even though they are *verbal* representations.

36. Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1987–90 (photograph of installation)

Sometimes disgustingness is a feature of representations of what is *unusually* disgusting. Representations of fantastic creatures offer instances of this. One case in point is symbolist Odilon Redon's *The Deformed Octopus* [ca 1883]. Eyes and hair are not typically disgusting on their own, but they readily become so if hair surrounds the eye as in Redon's imaginary creature. However, I am hesitant to consider Redon's as an instance of the non-disgusting made disgusting through representation. Redon's creature might well be (at least) as disgusting if it were real and experienced in the flesh.

37. Odilon Redon, *The Deformed Octopus*, ca 1883

The most convincing cases of disgusting representations of the non-disgusting are cases such as Arcimboldo's *Eve and the Apple* [1578]. In these cases, a detailed and unambiguous representation of something non-disgusting contributes to an overall disgusting representation when employed in a broader context. It does so insofar as, in this broader context, the representation can be interpreted as of something disgusting. In the Arcimboldo instance, a picture of naked women and men in intimate contact with one another is (mildly) disgusting insofar as it contributes to suggesting a deformity on Eve's facial skin—without actually representing it.

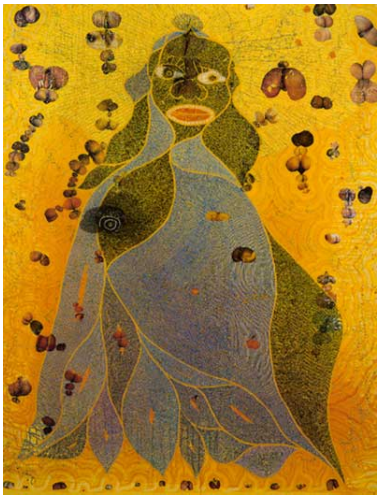


38. Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Eve and the Apple*, 1578

15. Now to the third and final category: disgusting representations of disgusting things. Given the quantity and variety of works of art that fall into this category, there are countless sub-categories one could order them into. I will consider two of these. First, there are representations whose artistic value crucially depends on their being disgusting. By contrast, in the case of some works, the disgusting is only a marginal component of their artistic value.

To the first sub-category belong works of contemporary art that capitalize on their capacity to shock the reader or viewer. The works I have in mind overlap to a large extent with Danto's category of the "intractable avant-garde". Some cases in point are some works by the already discussed Hirst, others by installation artist Paul McCarthy—e.g. his *Complex Shit* [2008]—as well as Chris Ofili's dung-adorned paintings—e.g. *The Holy Virgin Mary* [1996].

39. Paul McCarthy, *Complex Shit*, 2008 (photograph of installation)



40. Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996

More traditional instances of shock art are Medieval representations of rotting cadavers (or "transi"). Such representations started to be very common in the late Middle Ages. They served a double function: as reminders for those alive that death is incumbent on all and everyone had better avoid sin as long as they can (*memento mori*), and as a request on behalf of the dead to pray so that their souls may gain a better condition in the afterlife.

Particularly gruesome instances of this are some German sculptures representing the Tempter, or Prince of the World, and its female counterpart, Frau Welt. These are a young and handsome prince and a beautiful woman. They symbolize the sinful nature of man and the transient joys of the world. Sculpted on the exterior of some XIV-century cathedrals,[58] they show their power and beauty if looked at from the front. Their backs, by contrast, show the ghastly spectacle of their rotting bodies devoured by snakes and frogs.

41. *Tempter*, Strasbourg Cathedral, XIV century (black-and-white photograph of sculpture)

[58] See scupltures of the Tempter at Strasbourg (now in France) and Nuremberg Cathedrals, and of Frau Welt at Worms Cathedral (Cohen [1973], figs 28-30).

42. *Tempter*, Nuremberg Cathedral, XIV century (black-and-white photograph of sculpture)

Similar purpose and effects characterize the following extract from an early modern sermon by the Christian preacher Sebastiano Pauli [1684–1751]:

> As soon as this body, all things considered well put together and well organised, is closed up in its tomb it changes colour, becoming yellow and pale, but with a certain nauseating pallor and wanness that makes one afraid. Then it will blacken from head to toe; and a grim and gloomy heat, like that of banked coals, will cover it entirely. Then the face, chest, and stomach will begin to swell strangely: upon the stomach's swelling a foetid, greasy mould will grow, the foul product of approaching corruption. Not long thereafter, that yellow and swollen stomach will begin to split and burst here and there: thence will issue forth a slow lava of putrefaction and revolting things in which pieces and chunks of black and rotten flesh float and swim. Here you see a worm-ridden half an

> eye, there a strip of putrid and rotten lip; and further on a bunch of lacerated, bluish intestines. In this greasy muck a number of small flies will generate, as well as worms and other disgusting little creatures that swarm and wind around one another in that corrupt blood, and latching on to that rotten flesh, they eat and devour it. Some of these worms issue forth from the chest, others with I don't know what filth and mucus dangle from the nostrils; others, intermixed with that putridness, enter and exit from the mouth, and the most satiated come and go, gurgling and bubbling down the throat.[59]

16. Shock, however, is not the only effect that works in the present category can produce. Laughter is another one. Whether or not one views it as a defence mechanism, it is a commonly experienced phenomenon that the disgusting often accompanies the ridiculous. Consider for instance this passage from François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* [1532]:

> As Panurge came near, Friar John smelt an odour of some sort which was not gunpowder. So he turned Panurge round and saw that his shirt was all mucky and newly shitten. The retentive power of the nerve which controls the sphincter muscle—Panurge's arse-hole that is—had been relaxed by the extreme fear which had accompanied his fantastic visions. On top of this had come the thunder of the cannonading, which is more terrifying in the bowels of the ship than on the deck. Now one of the symptoms

[59] Cit. in Eco [2011], 65.

> and concomitants of fear is that it usually opens the gate of the seraglio in which the fecal matter is temporarily stored.[60]

Notice how this disgusting scenario is described almost exclusively in euphemistic terms, except for the simple and straightforward expression "newly shitten". This creates a contrast between the lowly subject and the mock-refined description of it, which contributes to the humoristic effect.

17. An instance of another way in which artistic value depends on disgustingness is the German Medieval painting *Les Amants Trépassés* [ca 1470], formerly attributed to Matthias Grünewald (now of more uncertain origins, and generally attributed to a Medieval master of Swabia). The painting is in the Medieval tradition of *memento mori* paintings and was originally accompanied by another panel representing the lovers alive.[61] The moral message of the painting, as an art historian usefully says, is that "Death, in all its hideousness, seems to have come as a result of their [the lovers'] love, and the reptiles are the palpable symbols of their sin".[62] The painting in fact interweaves sensuous appeal and repulsion, in a sort of embodied representation of the consequences of sexual desire in the Christian afterlife.

[60] Cit. in Eco [2011], 143.
[61] *Les Amants Trépassés* is in the Musée de l'œuvre Notre-Dame in Strasbourg. The formerly accompanying painting, *A Bridal Couple*, is in the Cleveland Museum of Art.
[62] Cohen [1973], 82n.

43. *Les Amants Trépassés*, ca 1470

However, the painting is more than just a symbolic condemnation of licentiousness. It is more visually complex than that. Instead of repelling the viewer, the hideousness of the scene turns into an aesthetically intriguing depiction of something fantastic and otherworldly. True to its subject, the painting almost transports the viewer into an other-world, where the two lovers are neither dead nor alive, and the frogs and snakes over their bodies call to mind the mythological creatures described in Medieval bestiaries. And yet, alongside the visual allure of this other world, the viewer also feels a mild pang of disgust that tastes very much of her own world.

A literary equivalent of *Les Amants Trépassés* can be found in the following passage from Stephen King's short story "The Man in the Black Suit":

> 'She made the most wonderfully awful noises', the man in the black suit said reflectively, 'and she scratched her face quite badly, I'm afraid. Her eyes bulged out like a frog's eyes. She wept.'

> He paused, then added: 'She wept as she died, isn't that sweet? And here's the most beautiful thing of all. After she was dead ... after she had been lying on the floor for fifteen minutes or so with no sound but the stove ticking and with that little stick of a bee-stinger still poking out of the side of her neck—so small, so small—do you know what Candy Bill did? That little rascal licked away her tears. First on one side ... and then on the other.'[63]

Disgusting images punctuate this description—the victim's eyes bulging out like frog's eyes, the crime's weapon poking out of the side of the victim's neck, a dog licking away her tears—but they are characterized in such a way as to entice the reader into a sort of morbid fascination with them. This effect is achieved through the emotionally detached description of the scene provided by the "man in the black suit"; this description seems simple and straightforward, and yet goes round, as it were, the disgusting features of the scene by using similes and metaphors for them ("frog's eyes", "bee-stinger"). In the words of the killer one can see how he views the horrid details of his crime as sources of pleasure. Through the killer's words, the reader, too, can (almost) witness this horrid and disgusting pleasure.

18. The second sub-category is constituted by those artworks in which disgustingness, although present, has a marginal role in the experience that such works afford their audience. One instance of this is Fra' Angelico's *Triptych of St Peter the Martyr* [ca 1425]. The *Triptych*, executed for the old Convent of St Peter the Martyr in Verona, is composed of several panels. It is visually dominated by a Virgin Mary Enthroned with Child and, at

[63] King [2002], 47–48.

her sides, Saints Dominic and John the Baptist, and Peter the Martyr and Thomas Aquinas, each standing in the traditional characterization. On top of these three main scenes, smaller scenes appear, between the divisions created by the golden frame. In particular, scenes from St Peter's life are inserted in-between the three cusps capping the three main scenes.

44a–b. Fra' Angelico, *Triptych of St Peter the Martyr*, ca 1425 (detail on the right-hand side)

The scene on the right-hand end represents graphically the martyrdom of St Peter, hit on the head with a knife by his killer (hired, according to the legend, by a group of Milanese Cathars). From St Peter's head, the blood drips all the way down to his right finger, allowing the saint to trace the sentence "Credo in deum unum" [I believe in a single God] on the floor (Cathars embraced a dualist view of divinity, to which St Peter was opposed). Although of central importance in St Peter's life, Fra' Angelico relegates his martyrdom to a relatively minor place within the triptych. This is no surprise given the iconographic tradition of hagiographic painting. In fact, having such a graphic depiction of St Peter's martyrdom in the

foreground of the triptych would have been absolutely out of the question for a painting commissioned for a Christian convent in the Middle Ages. It would have been almost blasphemous to attract the attention of Medieval monks and church-goers so forcefully to such a violent and disturbing scene.

Its relatively marginal position notwithstanding, Fra' Angelico's depiction of St Peter's martyrdom is visually captivating. It respects the rule that many of the greatest masters of art have over the centuries implicitly followed, according to which art should not too greatly disturb its audience. St Peter's tonsure is rather non-naturalistically covered in dripping blood. There is no trace of perforation on the saint's head, making the blood look rather like a splash of red paint; looking at the way it clots on St Peter's right shoulder, the blood also seems to have the thicker solidity of paint. Consonantly, the saint closes his eyes in unnaturally calm resignation while he reaffirms, with his writing on the floor, the religious convictions for which he is being killed. Although Fra' Angelico's painting represents an eminently cruel and gruesome episode, the representation itself, although not completely non-disgusting, is significantly less gruesome than it might have been. The saint almost seems to get out unscathed from the blow; for a Christian, in fact, his more permanent self (i.e. his soul) is actually left unscathed. And again, this is perfectly in accordance with the Christian iconographic tradition.

To conclude, Fra' Angelico's *Triptych* does not achieve its artistic effect, or have the artistic value it has, primarily due to a combination of disgust and aesthetic pleasure. In fact, the role of disgust in it is marginal in two ways: (1) in terms of physical location within the work, and consequently of relative place in a typical viewer's experience, and (2), within the relatively

small detail depicting the saint's martyrdom, the disgust experience elicited in the competent and attentive viewer is intentionally toned down so that it does not constitute a significant element in her aesthetic experience.

5. Why Disgusting Art: The paradox of negative emotions

1. Why are disgusting things accepted or sought after much more when they are the subject of artworks, than when they are, as it were, experienced in real life? This question is a particular instance of a problem concerning negative, or unpleasant emotions in general.[1] The latter is often called the "paradox of negative emotions" or "paradox of aversion".[2] Particular instances of the general paradox that have received philosophical attention in the past are those engendered in the case of artistic appreciation of tragedies, the sublime, and horror.[3] The case of disgust has so far received relatively little attention, although discussion on it was recently spurred by Carolyn Korsmeyer [2011]. Given this background, the present chapter will explore the potential that several existing solutions to the paradox of negative emotions have both generally, and in the case of disgust more specifically. The next chapter will continue the same project, and bring it to completion, by concentrating on the two major

[1] Although for simplicity's sake I often talk of "negative" and "unpleasant" emotions, the hedonic reality of emotions is more nuanced and complicated than these labels might suggest. I will discuss the issue of mixed hedonic character later in this chapter.

[2] Discussion of the paradox will often involve comparison between counterpart real-life and artistic scenarios. The notion of a *counterpart* is hard to define with much precision or theoretical reliability, nor can appeals to equally vague notions, e.g. *similarity*, overcome this difficulty. Use of the notion of *counterpart* in what follows may be deemed loose by some standards, but I will aim to make such use as precise as is useful for my purposes. Among other things, where it does not harm the precision and informativeness of the account, I will not make much of the difference between a counterpart experience and a counterpart *object of* experience. Overall, my purpose in discussing the paradox of negative emotions will be to have a springboard for the ultimate, more important aim of providing an informative account of the value of disgusting art.

[3] See e.g. Aristotle [350BCE/1996], Augustine [398/1992], Book III, Hume [1757/1777]; Burke [1757/1958], Kant [1790/1978]; Carroll [1990].

philosophical discussions of the value of disgusting art.

2. The paradox of negative emotions is broader, and it requires a broader solution, than is sometimes assumed. For one thing, it does not just concern the pleasure/pain dichotomy. It is usually cashed out as a problem that involves negative emotions, and the most evident feature of negative emotions is that they are unpleasant to feel. On the other hand, a simple view of artistic appreciation identifies it as mainly residing in aesthetic pleasure. The paradox of negative emotions was commonly understood in terms of the pleasure/pain dichotomy in the eighteenth century. However, that simple view of artistic appreciation is no longer considered (completely) satisfactory in contemporary debates—and with good reason. The value of art (like its purpose) cannot in general be confined to its capacity to afford aesthetic pleasures in a narrow sense.

Nonetheless, if 'pleasure' is defined more broadly than this, and 'aesthetic' is replaced by the (in this context) broader 'artistic', then these may become capacious enough to be able to account for art generally. If they do, then they will have become compatible with unpleasant emotional feelings. At the same time, the negativity of negative emotions is only too narrowly construed in terms that are dichotomic with emotional unpleasantness as a type of sensation. Two main ways of construing unpleasantness more broadly are possible. The first is to see unpleasantness less like pain than like an instance of more generally undesirable phenomenological qualities. A second, more radical way is to understand emotional negativity as involving other kinds of dis-values in addition to sensory or phenomenological unpleasantness. Acceptance of this second way can be seen as a natural consequence of any view of emotions which grants some substantial role to cognition. On a view of this kind, emotional

unpleasantness is the consequence or the typical accompaniment of a cognitive, evaluative view (crucially involving beliefs or imagination) of the nature of certain objects. What creates the paradox is, in other words, not simply the unpleasantness that comes from being angry, but the disvalue that we typically attribute to anger-inducing scenarios.

The paradox of negative emotions is then best conceived of in broader terms than as the puzzling pleasure that audiences seek in material that ought to be unpleasant. Instead of pleasure and pain, it is more apt to talk of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, or of value and disvalue. Once it is cashed out in terms as broad as those of value and disvalue, then it also loses a necessary connection to emotions. So the paradox becomes one revolving around our surprising inclination to value (by attending, devoting our time and energies to, etc.) what is otherwise typically disvalued. In this broad construal, it is more appropriately labelled 'the paradox of negative value' or 'the paradox of negatively valuable art'.[4]

Moreover, the paradox is a broader issue than one that concerns fiction as an artistic genre. Consider for instance John Morreall [1985]'s traditional definition of the paradox as asking

> how is it that non-masochistic, nonsadistic people are able to enjoy watching or reading about fictional situations which are filled with suffering.[5]

One way to read Morreall here makes out the "fictional situations" he refers to as non-existent, made-up situations. But the paradox of negative value does

[4] 'The paradox of aversion' is also a good label in this sense, as it does not make a narrow reference to emotions. I prefer however to be more explicit and talk of negative value.

[5] Morreall [1985], 95.

not arise only within the fiction genre (although the boundaries of the latter are difficult to draw with precision). Non-fictional, tear-jerker documentaries about starving children in Africa are more greatly sought after (more often and by a greater number of people) than the real situations they portray. And similar remarks can be made about historical dramas and all sorts of other non-fictional artworks. Whatever Morreall's intentions were, then, it is best not to restrict the scope of the paradox of negative value to fiction.[6]

3. The paradox has received quite a lot of attention throughout the centuries and a host of different solutions have been proposed for it. On a rough historical overview, one could say that the roots of contemporary discussions of it lie in German- and English-speaking eighteenth-century aesthetic theories; and these in turn were due to a rediscovery of classical art, and in particular of Aristotle's theoretical reflections on it in his long-lost (first book of the) *Poetics*. In fact, the existence of a great variety of solutions to the paradox depends in part on the existence of different instantiations of it. One can group them all under a common label, but each instantiation poses a paradox that has its own particular features. It is trivial to point out that there are important differences in the artistic experiences afforded by Greek tragedy, contemporary horror movies or any other of the host of art forms and genres that deploy negative emotions. Even within a single genre, each artwork has its own particular features, and it often affords more than a single appropriate artistic experience. As a consequence, it may well be the case that there is more than one good solution to the paradox, even insofar as a *single* work of art is concerned.

The best that one can do is to approach the paradox *pluralistically*. In other

[6] Cf. also Chapter 3 for similar considerations regarding the so-called "paradox of fiction".

words, one has to accept that in many cases there will be more than one good reason for valuing each artwork, and, *a fortiori*, each type, genre or form of art; and sometimes this will also mean more than one good solution to the paradox of negatively valuable art for each artwork, and, *a fortiori*, for each type, genre or form of art. However, it remains a worthy endeavour to (strive to) provide the solution(s) that are appropriate to the best instances of artworks belonging to a suitably narrow class, as well as the most appropriate (kinds of) account of their artistic value. This is what this and the next chapter aim to do with disgusting art. (This is also the aim that most previous contributors have, more or less explicitly, had in offering and discussing solutions to the paradox of negative emotions.) As already mentioned, not much work has been done specifically on disgust. In a large part of what follows, then, I will consider options that can be found in the literature on instantiations of the paradox that do not concern disgusting art (not explicitly, at least).

4. On Gary Iseminger [1983]'s influential distinction, there are two broad kinds of solutions to the paradox: co-existentialist and integrationist ones. On a co-existentialist account, what happens is "simply a case of one emotion being strong enough to overcome the other, laughter through tears, as it were".[7] Introducing a terminology that will come in handy throughout the chapter, one can talk of a negative and a positive 'component' of an artistic experience of the kind in which a paradox of negative value arises.

For a co-existentialist solution, the negative and positive components co-exist, and the positive wins out. In other words, a co-existentialist solution works in any case in which the artwork affords enough of a positive experience

[7] Iseminger [1983], 81.

to make the audience put up with the negative bits that are present in it. Note that, in the case of emotions, it is not necessary that the positive emotion be strictly speaking "stronger" than the negative. It is sufficient that the positive emotional component has a strong enough appeal to motivate the audience to experience the negative. An integrationist solution invokes instead a more integrated experience, one in which the positive component is created or enhanced through a contribution from the negative one—or in which, as Iseminger says, "the one actually contributes to the other".[8]

More recently, Jerrold Levinson [2006] has advanced a more articulate categorization of solutions to the paradox. He identifies five different categories: compensatory, conversionary, organicist, revisionary and deflationary solutions. Compensatory and organicist solutions attempt to carve more or less the same logical space that Iseminger's co-existentialist and integrationist ones, respectively, do. Compensatory solutions are those in which undergoing the negative component of the artistic experience is negatively valuable in itself, but "offers other rewards that compensate for this".[9] Organicist solutions are instead those in which the negative component "is an essential element in a total experience, an organic whole that is desired or valued".[10] Like co-existentialism, a compensatory account holds that, of two components of opposite axiological sign, the positive one is strong enough to compensate for the presence of the negative. On the other hand, both integrationism and organicism suggest greater unity between the positive and negative components than do co-existentialist and compensatory accounts, respectively.

[8] Iseminger [1983], 82.
[9] Levinson [2006], 52.
[10] Levinson [2006], 52.

However, there are some differences between Iseminger's and Levinson's formulae. One is that compensatory solutions put too much stress on the appreciator's undergoing the negative (component of the) experience. By contrast, co-existentialism more generally talks of two components of an experience, and it is undergoing this experience, rather than the negative component specifically, that offers rewards. To be sure, this difference is more in the form than in the substance of matters: undergoing the entire experience involves undergoing its negative part. Nonetheless, I prefer the emphasis present in Iseminger's notion of co-existentialism. It is more obviously open to instances in which the rewards to be gained are very tenuously connected to the prices to pay, e.g. when the two are only connected by their being part of the same artwork. (Such co-existentialist instances might have obvious faults, but they, as it were, should be made to feel welcome in the logical space.)

Moreover, organicist solutions refer to an essential relation between positive and negative component, whereas integrationism more helpfully appeals to the latter's *contribution* to the former. *Contribution* is a more helpful notion because it more clearly identifies the difference with co-existentialism: essentiality/contingency are less tangible, and more difficult (as well as perhaps more ambiguous) issues to settle, than presence/absence of a contribution. Moreover, essentiality is too strong a condition, and hence leaves too much of an open gap in the logical space between organicism and co-existentialism: i.e. that of contributions that are contingent in the sense that an artist could have done otherwise. If, instead, essentiality and contingency are simply meant in a narrower sense, i.e. as co-extensional with presence/absence of a contribu-

tion,[11] then the former are best avoided as potentially misleading. In the case of integrationism, too, I prefer Iseminger's carving-up.

So, is either a co-existentialist or an integrationist solution any good for disgusting art? Yes. In fact, it is the aim of this chapter to argue that a particular type of integrationist solution is the account that is often the most appropriate to the best disgusting art (especially when it comes to *aesthetic*, rather than artistic value more broadly). However, co-existentialist solutions are also, in some cases, appropriate for disgusting art. To be sure, ever since Iseminger's introduction of the category, co-existentialist solutions have been often viewed as partial or less-than-ideal solutions. They suggest a weaker unity in the countenanced value than integrationist ones, and as a consequence they appear more appropriate for artistic products of a lesser achievement. When a work is great, the underlying assumption goes, its component parts really should be integrated in such a manner as to afford a coherent and organic experience. In general I share this assumption, so I am inclined to look past co-existentialist solutions in search of a solution that is more appropriate for high-end artistic products and revealing of a more interesting phenomenon than the algebraic sum of different artistic experiences.

However, to be clear, I am certainly not suggesting that co-existence or compensation is never part of any artistic experience, greater or more modest. Pretty much any artistic experience, like pretty much any experience in life more generally, contains certain bad-tasting bits that one simply puts up with in order to get the delicacies that are also offered therein. Almost never are all passages in a novel, all scenes of a play or all nooks and crooks in a painting

[11] Such seems for instance the way in which Feagin [1992], 82, understands them.

perfectly integrated with each other and individually afford positively valuable experiences. As earlier suggested, in many cases one must approach the paradox of negative value pluralistically if one wants to have a decent stab at solving it. On a pluralistic strategy, co-existentialist solutions will certainly be part of the story for some artworks—even if they are not the most important part of the story when it comes to much of the best disgusting art. Moreover, art is not a one-wins-all endeavour, nor should it be understood as a mere succession of great geniuses or masterworks. There are many important works of disgusting art for which a co-existentialist solution is most appropriate (even leaving aside the importance of failures in the history or "development" of art).

5. One compensatory solution that has been proposed for a subset of disgusting art is Noël Carroll [1990]'s proposed solution to the paradox of *horror*. On this solution, artworks in the horror genre are appealing in virtue of the curiosity and fascination that they typically (engender and) satisfy in their audiences. Such works do so because their core business, so to speak, is to portray impossible or categorially violating creatures. As Carroll himself points out, his solution suggests that the negative emotional response elicited by horror is "outweighed" by the, broadly speaking, "cognitive" pleasures arising from curiosity and fascination.[12] As such, Carroll's is a co-existentialist account: no contribution (direct, at least) is postulated from the negative horror response to the cognitive pleasure.[13]

Carroll's account of horror has been criticized from various quarters, but two are the most important charges that have been raised against it—both

[12] Carroll [1990], 192 and 184.

[13] This is true, Carroll qualifies, for "the average consumer of horror"—as opposed to a few "connoisseurs of gore" who may in fact find the core of their pleasure in their horrified responses (192–3).

of which were pre-emptively addressed by Carroll in his book. One criticism is that not every work of horror is fundamentally concerned with categorially violating beings. The second criticism concerns the loose connection between the emotional response that is typical of horror and horror's main appeal as identified by Carroll.[14]

The latter is in fact an instance of the general criticism mentioned above and frequently raised against co-existentialist accounts. In response to this criticism, Carroll says that there is in fact a strong connection in play, although it is only a contingent one. Again, the connection revolves around the categorially violating beings that Carroll deems central to horror. Such beings, in fact, are both fascinating and horrifying for the same reason: because they defy our conceptual categories. As fascination and horror have the same root, the connection between the two is strong. Yet it is only contingent because "[n]ot everything that fascinates horrifies and not everything that horrifies fascinates".[15]

In fact, disgust has a crucial role in Carroll's rejoinder. "Art-horror" (i.e. the distinctive emotional response that Carroll deems appropriate to works of art in the horror genre) has two component causes: threat and disgustingness. However, on Carroll's account, the categorially violating is especially connected with disgust. Carroll in fact adopts the Mary Douglas [1966/2003]-inspired view of disgust outlined in Chapter 1. On this theory, the disgusting just is the categorially violating. In fact, it is not really clear to me why Carroll stops short of stating an essential connection between horror and fascination. If disgust is an essential component of horror, then whatever horrifies disgusts. If, moreover,

[14] See e.g. Feagin [1992] and Korsmeyer [2011].
[15] Carroll [1990], 191.

disgust is essentially categorially violating, and what is categorially violating fascinates (as Carroll also suggests), then whatever disgusts fascinates. Horror and fascination are thus essentially connected: everything that horrifies also fascinates.

Would accepting this save Carroll from the second criticism outlined above? Absolutely not—if anything, it would make his position even worse. It would save him if the Douglas-inspired theory of disgust were true; but this is not the case, for reasons already provided in Chapter 1. Categorial violation does not capture all and only instances of the disgusting. Carroll, in other words, bets on the wrong horse in subscribing to Douglas's theory of impurity. (In fact, he may be unwittingly realizing this himself when he suggests that not everything that horrifies fascinates.) On the one hand, then, the main response solicited by horror is to horrify; but, on the other, being horrified is not just contingently, but *only occasionally* connected to the real reason why the average audience member seeks out horror fictions.

The other criticism to Carroll's view that I singled out is that not every horror fiction fundamentally involves categorially violating beings. The counterexample that is classically cited in this respect is that of horror fictions starring psychopathic killers, in particular so-called "slasher" films. Psychopathic killers are instances of a neatly defined category, the critics argue, that of human beings. They therefore defy Carroll's rule, in that they do not violate any of our standard categories.[16]

[16] See Gaut [1993] and [1995] for this criticism. One could say that there is a standard category that psychopaths violate, viz. the category of humans as (more or less) psychologically balanced individuals. Although such psychologically balanced humans might be the vast majority of humans, mentally ill, evil or amoral people have always be known to exist. They certainly are not "beings whose existence is not countenanced by science" (Carroll [1995], 68). However, talk of "our standard categories" is loose and can be stretched one way or the other rather easily.

Carroll [1990] and [1995]'s response to such a criticism is to insist that, if slasher films of the relevant kind (e.g. *Psycho* [1960] and *The Silence of the Lambs* [1991]) are in fact horror fictions, then their protagonists (Norman Bates and Hannibal Lecter, respectively) are in fact categorially violating creatures. In Carroll's words, they are beings "whose existence is not countenanced by science".[17] They are so because they stretch real-life characteristics to impossible measures. Although psychopathic killers do really exist, they are never, for instance, as clever, strong, knowledgeable etc., as Hannibal Lecter is in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Moreover, Carroll is keen to stress that he is "not convinced that we should consider works such as *Psycho* and *The Silence of the Lambs* to be horror fictions".[18] The suggestion here is that slasher films are atypical cases of horror, if they are cases of horror at all.

Difficult as it is to be precise about genre boundaries without recourse to a theory, Carroll certainly captures something of the common usage of the category of horror when he says slasher films of the kind in hand are not typical instances of horror. To adopt a rule-of-thumb distinction often used, slasher films fall between thriller and horror films, in a categorial scale that goes from detective to thriller to horror—each one roughly featuring an increasing level of gruesomeness.[19] Perhaps predictably and yet tellingly, Carroll points to the boundaries of the genre by means of a few paradigmatic works: "The type of horror to be explored here is that associated with reading something like [etc.]".[20] If one takes our concept of the horror genre to work on an exemplar-

[17] Carroll [1995], 68.
[18] Carroll [1995], 68.
[19] Here I simply disagree with Gaut [1993] when he claims that such films "look like paradigm examples of the modern horror film" (334). It is works like the *Alien* or *Saw* film cycles that are more obvious paradigm examples of modern horror.
[20] Carroll [1990], 12.

theory model, and the horror genre exemplars are fictions such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* [1818] and Ridley Scott's *Alien* [1979],[21] then slasher films will naturally appear at the periphery in the relevant conceptual space. As Carroll persuasively says: "note how rarely one has cause to dispute the sorting of items under the rubric of horror in your local video store".[22]

Moreover, Carroll explicitly says that his "theory of horror"[23] focuses "narrowly [on] the effects of a specific genre" and that "not everything that might be called horror that appears in art is art-horror".[24] The two phenomena that art-horror is explicitly distinguished from are, on the one hand, "natural horror" (e.g. the emotional reaction that would seem most appropriate to the nuclear bombs dropped by the Allies on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II), and on the other, any horrific moment in art that is outside of the confines of the horror genre properly so called.

Even if slashers turned out to be genuine cases of horror, Carroll would still have a way out of this criticism. It is certainly true that, as Berys Gaut says, slasher films represent a counter-example to Carroll's claim that all horror fictions "involve monsters understood in the sense of impossible beings".[25] And Carroll certainly takes this sense as his own and defends his theory accordingly. He does not need to do so, however. In the sense in which Douglas [1966/2003] understands categorial violation, this is not a prerogative of scientifically impossible things. Real-life phenomena can also be categorial violations, as long as they violate categories that are entrenched in common culture. A case in

[21] See Carroll [1990], 12.
[22] Carroll [1990], 13.
[23] Carroll [1990], 12.
[24] Carroll [1990], 13.
[25] Gaut [1995], 284.

point is her famous characterization of faeces as in-between live and dead material. Douglas's theory was after all meant to explain cultural attitudes towards impurity, or the disgusting—real-life impurity, that is.[26] [27]

The real problem with Carroll's view does not lie in the existence of counter-examples to his positing of categorially violating monsters as the protagonists of horror fictions (the notion of *categorially violating beings* is so porous that it is of little theoretical use anyway). If anything, the problem lies in the already mentioned inadequacy of categorial violation as a means of individuating what is disgusting. Not all horror fictions deal with disgusting "monsters", even when their monsters can be made to fit the 'categorially violating' label. Robot or machine killers, handsome-looking vampires, as well as psychopaths all star in horror fictions, and they can all be seen, with more or less strain or ingenuity, as lying in-between live and dead creatures. But they are not always disgusting. Although they may bring about gory or disgusting situations by their actions, they are not themselves necessarily disgusting. Whatever disgust may be involved in horror fictions revolving around them, therefore, cannot essentially be connected to their categorially violating protagonists.

There is thus a tenuous connection between Carroll's characterization of the emotion of art-horror (fear plus disgust) and the cognitive pleasures in which he identifies horror appreciation as mainly residing. This is for two reasons.

[26] Cf. also Chapter 1.

[27] Other counter-examples to Carroll's categorially violating-monsters condition have been suggested in the literature. A peculiarly powerful kind is non-fictional horror, for instance a horror "shock-umentary" like *Traces of Death* [1993]; see Andrea Sauchelli [2014], 40–1. The challenge posed by this kind of films to Carroll's account is that they involve actual characters and events. But even in these cases Carroll has room for maneuvre. Here, too, he can, (1) dispute with some plausibility the appropriateness of categorizing shock-umentaries within the horror genre, and (2) massage a little the theoretical friction between protagonists of shock-umentaries and the categorially violating monster, e.g. by arguing that the way the shock-umentaries in question present their protagonists makes them appear as supernatural or categorially violating in some respect.

(1) Insofar as horror fictions revolve around categorially violating monsters, these do not necessarily horrify even when they fascinate. (2) Insofar as they are protagonists in horror fictions, monsters are not always disgusting, so, on Carroll's definition of art-horror, they do not always horrify.

One could try to save Carroll's account from this predicament by either (or both) taking disgust out of the definition of art-horror or (and) by relaxing Carroll's insistence on the disgustingness of his horror monsters. Doing the former alone does not really strengthen the connection between horror and cognitive fascination or curiosity. Even where horror does not involve the disgusting, but only perhaps the fearsome, it remains an emotional response that would seem unnecessary for fascination or curiosity. Nor is pursuing the latter strategy alone any better. Even where it is recognized that horror monsters are not always disgusting, the emotional response appropriate to horror fictions, with or without the disgusting as a component cause, would continue to remain unnecessary for fascination or curiosity.

To be sure, that being horrified is so tenuously connected to horror appreciation is not a knock-down objection to Carroll's account (but then very few possible ideas count as knock-down objections in the philosophy of art). But it puts a serious strain on the plausibility of the account. First, it makes it rather puzzling that an art appreciator would look for these cognitive pleasures in such emotionally challenging works. Sci-fi or fantasy fictions would be similarly fascinating, but much less emotionally unpleasant. Relatedly, it is difficult to imagine how the desire to know about a non-existent, categorially violating creature might be so strong as to trump the aversion associated with the unpleasantness of the experience, especially in those cases in which the aversion and the fascination come from different aspects/features of the

fiction. To conclude, there must be something not countenanced by Carroll's co-existentialist solution, something peculiar to being horrified, that makes the experience of so many horror appreciators so worthwhile for them.

6. However, my focus is on disgusting art. So it is worth further investigating the connection between disgust and horror, beyond Carroll's flawed understanding of disgust in terms of categorial violation. Carroll is not the only one who claims that horror warrants emotional responses of fear and disgust, nor is he the first. However, disgust is not necessary for horror, although a lot of horror involves disgust. In order to show this, it is important to briefly consider the bigger question of what horror essentially is. Although an *exhaustive* treatment of this last question is outside of the scope of enquiry of this thesis, it is nonetheless worth discussing the issue in some depth. Many have suggested a close connection between horror and disgust, and Carroll's work on horror has stimulated an important share of discussion in contemporary aesthetics. Discussing in some depth the question of what horror is will help in understanding the connection between horror and disgust. Without such an understanding, the study of the value of disgusting art would run the risk of overlooking a significant relevant case study. The view that I find most plausible is that horror essentially deals with fear. Horror warrants a particular type of fear, i.e. fear that paralyzes.

For example, in one of the foundational critical texts on horror, Ann Radcliffe [1826] thus distinguishes it from terror:

> Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts,

> freezes, and nearly annihilates them.[28]

In Radcliffe's characterization of the two artistic effects, horror is exemplified by the scene of the appearance of Banquo's ghost in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, whilst the scenes in which the ghost of Hamlet's father appears, in *Hamlet*, exemplifies terror. The relevant difference between the two episodes, according to Radcliffe, lies in the superficiality and transitoriness of the former when compared to the profundity and permanence of the latter.

> The effect [of horror] though sudden and strong, is also transient; it is the thrill of horror and surprise [...] rather than the deep and solemn feelings excited under more accordant circumstances, and left long upon the mind.[29]

Writing more than a century and a half later, James Twitchell [1985] diverges from Radcliffe's view on a number of points. For Twitchell, it is horror that is "internal and long-lasting", whilst terror is "external and short-lived".[30] Also, "we will always have a sense of closure with terror and indeterminacy with horror".[31]

Their differences notwithstanding, however, both Radcliffe and Twitchell characterize horror in terms of its warranting an affective or physiological response of sudden *paralysis*. In a passage already quoted, Radcliffe says that horror "contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates" us emotionally. Similarly, Twitchell claims that in horror "we pause momentarily [...] frozen between fight and flight".[32] Moreover, both Radcliffe's and Twitchell's accounts sug-

[28] Radcliffe [1826], 149.
[29] Radcliffe [1826], 149.
[30] Twitchell [1985], 16.
[31] Twitchell [1985], 22.
[32] Twitchell [1985], 10.

gest, to varying degrees, a close association between horror and fear. Whilst Radcliffe only implicitly makes the connection, Twitchell is more explicit (e.g. when he says that "what is horrible is what we are frightened of").[33]

However, as already pointed out, some have argued that there is more to horror than just fear, and disgust is only one (additional) component. Nonetheless, insofar as common disgust elicitors are concerned, there would seem to be instances of horror that do not feature the disgusting in any interesting way. One example is offered by a story told in the final chapters of Alexander Dumas' novel *The Vicomte of Bragelonne*, which are usually grouped under the title "The Man in the Iron Mask".

The eponymous character in this story is the twin brother of Louis XIV of France, Philippe. Philippe is in jail from his birth and his existence is kept a secret from almost everyone in France. Aramis, one of the Musketeers, learns the secret and embarks, with fellow Musketeer Porthos, on an expedition to free Philippe. Aramis's aim is to dethrone Louis and instate Philippe in his place as King of France. The expedition is successful: Philippe takes Louis's place and Louis is imprisoned in the Bastille. But the success is short-lived and the fate of the two brothers is soon reversed yet again. This time, Louis orders, Philippe will be kept prisoner on an island, with his face "hidden forever beneath a mask of iron", which he will not "raise without peril of his life".[34]

The fate of the man in the iron mask in Dumas' story cannot be competently read without horror. Sensitive to the chilling power of Dumas' character, in fact, modern cinematic versions of the story have frequently elaborated on the horror response, and made it more central than it was in the original novel

[33] Twitchell [1985], 10.
[34] Dumas [1847–50/1893], 617 and 566.

(although in many of these versions a happy ending awaits Philippe).[35] Yet the story has hardly anything disgusting about it.

One might object that, although horrific in parts, neither Dumas' novel nor many of the films inspired by it are in the horror *genre* (Carroll might for instance take this line of objection). Thus, insofar as one's theory is a theory of the horror genre, it is not threatened by Dumas' story. Advancing such an objection might well be a winning move, *stricto sensu* at least. But it would be something of a Pyrrhic victory. For then one would wonder why it should be the case that disgust is an essential component of the horror response only in the horror genre, and *not* elsewhere.

An interesting critique of the short-sightedness and narrowness of such an approach to an account of horror is made by Robert Solomon [2004]. Solomon criticizes this approach for both its historical arbitrariness and theoretical uselessness. As Solomon says: "[a]rt horror is a historical phenomenon, and it has a long history that preceded the advent of cinema [...] by hundreds or thousands of years".[36] In fact, before the Gothic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (which many, including Carroll [1990], identify as the starting point of the horror genre),[37]

> there were real Gothic horror stories of all sorts [and before them] there was Petronius's *Satyricon* and the many monsters of the *Odyssey*, not to mention the horrifying manifestations of Shiva and Kali, the malevolent goddesses of the Solomon Islands and the devils of Bali,

[35] See for instance *The Man in the Iron Mask* [1939], *The Fifth Musketeer* [1979], and *The Man in the Iron Mask* [1998].
[36] Solomon [2004], 120.
[37] In fact, this is a relatively uncontroversial starting point for modern horror amongst scholars of the genre, especially in literary studies; cf. Twitchell [1985].

> the monster Grendel in *Beowulf*, and later the perversities of Merlin in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.[38]

Moreover, Solomon adds,

> [w]hat happened in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is but part of a story that goes back to prebiblical times, no doubt beginning when a few rather clever cavemen (or, more likely, cavewomen) scared the pelts off some of the youngsters by invoking the possible presence of monsters that were by no means fictional at the time. Stoking the emotions with (more or less) make-believe horror on the basis of honest-to-goodness real horror seems to be one of those perennial but often neglected bits of human nature that make our species both much more interesting and more perverse than it would be if we limited ourselves to real horror.[39]

Solomon's project here, as I understand it, is to account for the general affective phenomenon of which something like, for instance, Carroll's "art-horror" is a part. From this more general viewpoint, "real horror" is the beefy phenomenon to account for. I share this viewpoint. Much like what I have so far tried to do in this thesis with disgust, horror must be understood in its general lines *before* one attempts to understand its employment in art. If this direction of enquiry is not followed, then a selective attention to the horror genre narrowly defined is less likely to yield a satisfactory understanding of horror in art (and perhaps even of the horror genre). Accordingly, my contention is that disgust, as an emotional response to art, is not necessary for

[38] Solomon [2004], 120.
[39] Solomon [2004], 120–1.

horror, as an emotional response to art. As such, my claim concerns horror as it is elicited in art, rather than the possibly mixed or complex emotional response that is appropriate to artworks in the horror genre.

It is perhaps worth stressing at this point that I am neither denying that the horror genre should be delimited in the way that many suggest, nor that most works in the horror genre have a significant disgust component. In my view, (a) there is the emotional response of horror; (b) many, but not all, of the works in the horror genre will warrant it (some really bad ones will for instance only be hilarious); (c) many, if not most works in the horror genre will (also) warrant responses other than horror (e.g. disgust); and, finally, (d) some artworks outside of the horror genre, as well as real-life events and characters, will also warrant horror[40] (e.g. "The Man in the Iron Mask" and the Hiroshima/Nagasaki atomic bombs).

So disgust is not essential to horror. Horror is in fact a type of fear. An endorsement for this view comes from a contemporary master craftsman of the genre, Stephen King, who elaborated with some critical explicitness on his own understanding of artistic horror.[41] King [1981] distinguishes between three types of artistic effect within the horror genre. These types are hierarchically ordered in a descending scale of "fine[ness]":[42] terror, horror, and the gross-out.

King draws the distinction between terror and horror more or less along the lines drawn a century and a half earlier in Radcliffe [1826]: the two are distinguished by the former's greater subtlety and abstraction with respect to

[40] This is true at least insofar as genre classifications work as *all-things-considered* endeavours. On an alternative strategy, which is at least in some cases appealing, horrific bits of artworks determine a classification of those artworks in the horror genre, whilst other, even more dominant features of the works, determine *additional*, different classifications.

[41] See King [1976] and King [1981].

[42] King [1981], 23.

the latter.

> Terror is the sound of the old man's continuing pulsebeat in [Edgar Allan Poe's] "The Tell-Tale Heart"—a quick sound, "like a watch wrapped in cotton". Horror is the amorphous but very physical "thing" in Joseph Payne Brennan's wonderful novella "Slime" as it enfolds itself over the body of a screaming dog.[43]

The gross-out, instead, corresponding to "the gag reflex of revulsion", is the "lowest" of the three, the most superficial and less "potent", as well as the "most childish".[44] It is the last resort of a horror writer like King:

> I recognize terror as the finest emotion [...] and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find I cannot terrify him/her, I will try to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud.[45]

The elements of King's analysis that I would like to highlight are the following. Firstly, King explictly distinguishes between horror properly so called, terror, and the artistic effect associated with disgust (or "the gross-out").[46] This confirms my previous classification, and in particular my distinction between horror and disgust. Secondly, although he distinguishes between them, King includes all three effects as elements of the horror genre. This, together with the fact that King offers the three effects in hierarchical order, supports my view that horror is essentially about fear, whilst disgust has only a contingent

[43] King [1981], 22.
[44] King [1981], 23, 10, 116.
[45] King [1981], 23.
[46] See Nabi [2002] for empirical confirmation of the greater specificity of 'gross-out' than 'disgust' as an expression that refers to physical disgust, particularly in American English—as opposed to moral disgust.

or occasional role.[47]

A challenge to horror's categorization as a type of fear comes from Solomon [2004], who isolates horror as a distinct, and even perhaps irreducible emotion.[48] He distinguishes it from disgust,[49] but also from fear.[50] I disagree with Solomon's latter distinction. He provides the following two counterexamples to the claim that horror is a kind of fear: (1) thunders can be frightening but not horrific, and (2) one can be horrified by a piece of news that "suggests no threat whatever to oneself or to anyone one knows".[51]

As to (1), although thunders might on first inspection seem less apt at eliciting fear, scenarios can certainly be imagined in which horror ensues from the threat that thunders represent (e.g. a scenario in which the inhabitants of an entire village die as a consequence of a huge thunderstorm). Whatever resistance we might have to imagining thunders as horrific, I surmise, stems from the fact that we are more readily horrified by the realization of the *consequences* of dangerous events than by their *prospect*. To be precise, we are horrified by the dangerous event *as it happens* (e.g. by imagining, or God forbid witnessing, the thunder as it strikes). By contrast, we usually imagine thunders much before they strike; it is this expectation that is more terrifying

[47] Cf. also King's general and explicit emphasis on fear: see e.g. King [1981], 11: "[horror] achieves the level of art simply because it is looking for [...] what I would call *phobic* pressure points" (emphasis mine); and King [1981], 135: "Now the simple fact of horror fiction in whatever medium you choose...the *bedrock* of horror fiction, we might say, is simply this: you gotta scare the audience" (author's emphasis).

[48] "[Horror] can indeed be a "primitive" emotion, one that is barely articulable and in that sense noncognitive (or cognitively impenetrable, in the latest jargon)" (Solomon [2004], 119). I will not discuss Solomon's general account of horror in what follows, except for the distinction he draws between horror and fear.

[49] Although I agree with this distinction, I am not sympathetic to the reasons Solomon cites in its support. In particular, I disagree with his appeal to disgust's "primitive" nature and the associated lack of necessary "recognition" of its object (although Solomon is not very precise on what recognition amounts to) (114). However, I agree with his claim that horror, unlike disgust, "depends on a much more sophisticated sense of *significance*" (114) (although I also think that Solomon underestimates disgust's cognitive sophistication). Cf. also Chapter 2.

[50] Solomon distinguishes horror further from, in this order: startle, wonder, anxiety, and dread. It is also worth emphasizing that these distinctions pertain to the emotion of horror to real events (or real horror); in art, Solomon is at pains to point out, horror is likely to mix with other affects, including fear and disgust.

[51] Solomon [2004], 117.

than horrifying (as Solomon suggests). Horror is an extreme kind of fear, the fear of the almost inevitable.

Although extreme, or, in a sense, borderline, horror *is* fear. Horror is not disappointment or sadness at what has already happened. When it is elicited by something that has already happened, it is triggered by our imaginative (sometimes on the basis of memory) sympathizing with the victims of the dangerous event. Moreover, in response to Solomon's objection (2), the victims we sympathize with need not be us or "anyone [we] know" (though they may be). Firstly, we can have emotions by empathetically *imagining* being in someone else's situation. Moreover, we sometimes have emotions and care for people who we are neither related to, nor have we ever met or "know[n]", and whom we *believe* to be in danger.[52]

In fact, Solomon goes on to admit that horror is fear that paralyzes, even though he also denies that it is fear (thus on the face of it contradicting himself). His words are not of straightforward interpretation but are worth quoting in full. He says:

> In horror, one stands (or sits) aghast, frozen in place or glued to one's seat. Of course, one can be frozen (or paralyzed) by fear, but that is when fear becomes horror. Horror involves a helplessness that fear evades. The evasive activities of fear may be pointless, even self-defeating, but they are activities nonetheless, activities that can be feigned. Horror is a *spectator's* emotion, and thus it is especially well suited for the cinema and the visual arts. Horror does not include any "action readiness," in Nico Frijda's terms, unless we suppose that

[52] Carroll [1990], 94, makes this claim admirably in his discussion of character identification with horror.

> freezing and screaming are full-blown actions and not mere expressions of horror.[53]

I agree with Solomon when he says that horror is fear that paralyzes. However, I think he would do better to stop at that, without invoking a mysterious type of emotion that has no action readiness (an evolutionarily pointless emotion?). It would be easier and more coherent to simply say that, at least sometimes, fear *can* be paralyzing. Paralysis or "tonic immobility" may in fact well be (as Solomon suggests towards the end) part of the behavioural output of fear. Some researchers for instance suggest updating Walter Cannon [1915]'s traditional characterization of the behavioural response appropriate to fear as "fight or flight", to "freeze, flight, fight, or fright".[54] Helplessness, or near-helplessness is on this simpler view compatible with fear.

7. If disgust is not essential to horror and horror is in fact fear that paralyzes, then is it just a coincidence that there is a lot of disgusting stuff in most of what is usually classified as "horror"? No, but it is not a necessity either. The distinctive way in which disgust, or the *disgusting* is used in a lot of horror fictions is, I will argue, to *contribute to*—rather than constitute—horror. It does so by providing apt horror elicitors.

The fear that is greatest and most shared amongst human beings, it seems safe to say, is the fear of physical harm (up to and including death). Physical harm is often, among other things, disgusting to witness or think about. This is because our bodies are full of things (blood, organs, fluids, secretions) that

[53] Solomon [2004], 117–8; author's emphasis.

[54] See Bracha and Bracha [2004]; on these particular authors' terminology horror would actually correspond to the later "fright" response, which they also refer to as 'tonic immobility', or 'playing dead', a response that is especially apt "when there is no possibility of escaping or winning a fight" (449). In the present context I prefer to use the term 'freeze' to refer to the same stage.

are disgusting or readily become so once they come outside of our bodies. It is not surprising then that the disgusting pops up rather frequently in horror, which crucially deals with *extreme* fear. Showing disgusting consequences of extreme acts of violence or fatality is a simple way of showing physical harm and death in a crude and obvious fashion. Extreme displays of distressing events can easily (help to) elicit extreme fear.

As well as as extreme, I have also qualified the type of fear that horror is as *paralyzing*. Horror has a paralyzing effect because it is appropriate to extremely dangerous and distressing events that are (almost) inevitable. In such cases, the engaged art appreciator, insofar as she sympathizes with the endangered characters, is very concerned but knows that the characters' fate is already sealed and nothing will save them from harm/death/destruction.[55] As a consequence, the art appreciator is crippled by fear for the characters.[56] Neither fight nor flight seem able to change the outcome for them.

In this respect, there is some similarity between the fear and disgust responses. As I suggested in Chapter 2, there is a sense in which the disgusting warrants fear, although it is misleading to say that disgust is a type of fear. To some extent, disgust is a response to an obscure threat and features a pausing behaviour, i.e. one in which the disgusted person freezes and stares with concern at the disgusting stimulus. Like disgust, horror makes one freeze.

The similarity in phenomenology is connected to a more important similarity

[55] Of course, the art appreciator may in a sense know that a character will end up badly (because, e.g., she is re-experiencing the work, or has enough familiarity with the kind of work that it is to be able to predict its development), and she certainly knows that the character's fate is, as it were, already *written* (insofar as the work is not an interactive fiction and the character's fate does not 'depend' on the appreciator's choices in experiencing it). But both of these pieces of knowledge ought to have limited relevance in the appreciator's *imaginative engagement* with the work.

[56] For further details on how the appreciator can come to fear *for* characters, see below; see also Carroll [1990], 88–96.

in elicitors. A (quasi-)disgusting, obscure source of danger (e.g. the *Alien* monster) can, under the right circumstances, warrant extreme fear. Much as (even, more than) insects and spiders can be both (and often at the same time) disgusting and frightening, a lot of horror monsters have disgusting features, as well as fearsome ones. The particular threat that the disgusting often poses revolves around the possibility of physical contact with the threatening object. The victim of such a threat cannot generally fight; and, if flight is not possible either, then horror can ensue.[57]

However, disgusting things are ordinary encounters for us, and generally do not make for plausible horrific threats. Nonetheless, they can do so when they are modified or exaggerated in ways that defy credibility or scientific possibility. (Here Carroll's insight comes back to prove relevant, although not in the way that Carroll had intended.) Besides the *Alien* monster, think also of the gigantic snakes-slash-worms in *Tremors* [1990], or of the eponymous monster in *The Giant Spider Invasion* [1975].

However, the extraordinary nature of such monsters makes them somewhat different from our (ordinary) disgust elicitors. Since disgust is triggered by those ordinary elicitors towards which we have acquired disgust, our disgust towards such monsters, albeit present, is often only an incidental, or by-product response. Such monsters are mostly horrific, not disgusting; and whatever disgust they warrant is disgust at what these monsters *remind us of*—not at what they *are* (in the relevant fictions). They are not in fact tokens of one of the disgust-elicitor types on most of us's disgust elicitors lists: they are too out of the ordinary for that.

[57] Pole [1983] advances an insightful remark to this effect, calling the feeling of disgust "unmanageable" and "paralytic" (220).

Psychoanalyst Susan Miller [2004] makes a similar point in an insightful little chapter of hers on the distinction between disgust and horror. She claims that horror "is a response to what truly is alien and other-than-self and thus could obliterate self, whereas disgust more often bespeaks humanness, and kinship between self and Other".[58] Moreover, in specific reference to the *Alien* creature, she adds that:

> Though many of its forms are slimy and ugly, the alien evokes more horror than disgust because of the totality of its threat to human welfare. [...] Once in the spacecraft, it reproduces in rampant and unpredictable ways and constantly changes form, so that there is no way of containing it in intellectual or conceptual terms...[59]

Of course, her understanding of the horror elicitor is different from my own in that it appeals to an alienness from the self—rather than from a disgust-elicitor type. But then Miller's general account of disgust is very different from mine. She understands disgust in psychoanalytic terms and as a protection from threats to the integrity of our psychological self or identity—rather than essentially as a protection from more biological threats such as poisons and parasites.[60] Still, I believe that we both are making essentially the same point with respect to the difference between horror and disgust in such works in the horror genre as *Alien*.

In fact, Miller cites an episode from her clinical practice that is revealing and helps to reinforce the same point. She talks of a woman client of hers, who was so frustrated by the presence of dog hair in her house that she longed for

[58] Miller [2004], 171.
[59] Miller [2004], 172.
[60] Cf. Chapter 2.

the day the dogs (which she and her husband had bought for their children) would die. The woman described visiting the family friends who had convinced them to buy their dogs in the first place. Miller reports her description of this visit:

> These dog devotees were wearing sweaters and hats made from dog hair spun and woven by a woman they had hired to "revive a lost art." My client described this dog-infiltrated world as "kind of spooky." I asked her what she meant. Was it "gross" to her? "Disgusting?" She said, "You don't understand," and she re-explained how she and her husband "live with dog hair *everywhere*." I then felt I understood that the spookiness (aka horror) grew from the sense of being invaded and overtaken by something unwanted. I had been slow to grasp her experience, because dog hair seems so organic and nonalien to me that disgust made more sense, especially regarding the dog-hair garments. But in her experience, the dog hair had been rendered alien and—since it was also invasive—horror was apt.[61]

On the basis of such considerations, Miller goes on to speculate that the appeal of horror (in art) might be explained by appeal to the distinction between horror and disgust. Miller attempts such an explanation when she says that,

> [i]n horror, one merges with the impression, often visual. One no longer shuts one's eyes in revulsion, one fixes them open in fascination, enthrallment, and mystification.[62]

However insightful it may be, the latter point concerning the appeal of

[61] Miller [2004], 172–3.
[62] Miller [2004], 175.

horror is not something I can argue for or against here. Doing so would be out of the scope of the present enquiry. The foray I have been making into the neighbouring territory of horror should remain focused on disgust's specific contribution to it. So, to sum up the results of my foray, the disgusting (or the *quasi*-disgusting, as in (b) below) contributes to horror, insofar as it either (a) makes obvious the consequences of horrific threats, i.e. physical harm and death, or (b) presents itself in ways that are so out of the ordinary to make disgust a secondary or inessential part of the experience. In both cases, a co-existentialist account is appropriate with respect to horror that makes use of the disgusting. The disgust that a competent appreciator has towards both the consequences of horrific threats and horrific and quasi-disgusting monsters is often only a by-product of horror. It does not significantly contribute to the specific artistic value of many of the best works of horror.[63]

Evidence of this can for instance be found in a great (and paradigmatic) work of the horror genre such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In it Stevenson minimizes aesthetic by-products by reducing properly disgusting effects in the horror response he evokes. For example, this is the description that Stevenson provides of Mr Hyde the first time he appears in person in the story (when Mr Utterson meets him):

> Mr. Hyde was pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation, he had a displeasing smile, he had borne himself to the lawyer with a sort of murderous mixture of timidity and boldness, and he spoke with a husky, whispering

[63] Towards the end of this chapter I will consider a way in which some cases of horrific disgusting art might deserve an integrationist account.

> and somewhat broken voice; all these were points against him, but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which Mr. Utterson regarded him. "There must be something else," said the perplexed gentleman. "There is something more, if I could find a name for it. God bless me, the man seems hardly human! [...] O my poor old Harry Jekyll, if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is on that of your new friend."[64]

Although Stevenson explicitly mentions disgust, there is very little disgust in the passage. There are all sorts of things that might remind one of typically disgusting things, but none of them can be univocally identified as a typical disgust elicitor (e.g. there is "an impression of deformity" but no actual deformity etc.). By doing this, Stevenson contains our disgust, thus concentrating on the truly horrific, evil aspects of Mr Hyde's presence.

8. The foregoing discussion has addressed Carroll's co-existentialist account of the value of horror, probed its relevance for disgusting art, and shown that disgust and horror are more loosely connected than is often argued. Moving on (at least for the time being) from co-existentialism, an *integrationist* account that has received much interest over the years, and indeed millennia, is Aristotle's elusive (alleged) solution of the paradox of tragedy in terms of a "katharsis" (or purification) of pity and fear.[65] These few words are effectively all that Aristotle says about this solution. And the passage where Aristotle hints at this (possible) account of the pleasure inherent in tragedy has been analysed on endless occasions and in uncountably different ways. Other, slightly more

[64] Stevenson [1886], 19–20.
[65] Aristotle [350BCE/1996], 1449b.

extended passages from the *Rhetoric* and the *Politics*, respectively discussing tragic emotions and the role of katharsis in contexts different from tragedy, have been called in in the search for clarity on what katharsis in tragedy might be. But the evidence available is scarce and, some have thought, not sufficient for that clarity to be achieved.[66] Others, like Kenneth C. Bennett [1981], have even gone so far as to say that "[f]ew critical terms have been so universally abused—so distorted, so deracinated, so casually misapplied",[67] and "a survey of classical scholarship on the matter is also dismaying—and confusing—and it seems wisest to purge catharsis of its accreted meanings and declare a decent, thoroughgoing scepticism concerning Aristotle's intent".[68] (The confusion about katharsis is so great, in fact, that not everyone agrees in placing Aristotle's solution in the integrationist camp. Levinson [2006] for instance lists it as one of the compensatory solutions.)

Confusion notwithstanding, a discussion of plausible accounts that interpret, or are inspired by, Aristotle's remarks, is worth conducting. Although I am sympathetic to Bennett's scepticism about the possibility of retrieving Aristotle's own understanding of katharsis with any certainty, I think he goes too far when he claims that scholars need to "overcome the urge to deal with catharsis at all when commenting on tragedy".[69] Attempts to understand katharsis may still result in a good account of our experience of tragedy, although this account may not be entitled to claim with certainty its connection to Aristotle or to the name 'katharsis' as a term that refers to Aristotle's remarks in the

[66] Malcolm Heath, the most prominent living British *Poetics* scholar, has held this opinion for many years. However, Heath [2014] changes tack and argues for an interpretation of Aristotle's remarks on katharsis in terms of the pleasure that comes from the eventual abating of the affective unpleasantness initially caused by tragedies.
[67] Bennett [1981], 204.
[68] Bennett [1981], 211.
[69] Bennett [1981], 211.

Poetics.

Nonetheless, I am very sympathetic to Bennett's related suggestion that "we need an anatomy of the emotions that unfortunately does not yet exist [and] to venture into the uncharted region of affective criticism".[70] Such "affective criticism" is (once it is stripped of the more ideological connotations arising from twentieth-century wars between schools of literary criticism) something that is much needed in the philosophy of art, as much as in literary and art criticisms more generally. At least within contemporary analytic philosophy of art, much more (careful) work is certainly needed to complete such an anatomical charting. (The present dissertation in fact generally means to contribute towards that goal.) Precisely in the context of such affective criticism, it is worth considering a couple of possible understandings of katharsis that seem to have some general plausibility from a theoretical viewpoint (as well as staking a reasonable claim to philological plausibility).

One is the very influential interpretation developed by Martha Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness*.[71] Drawing on philological and historico-philosophical considerations, Nussbaum argues that katharsis is "a clarification (or illumination) concerning experiences of the pitiable and fearful kind".[72] In other words, she interprets the purification that Aristotle refers to as a cognitive process in which the negatively valuable experiences witnessed on the stage (or read on paper etc.) result in a positively valuable understanding of certain aspects of those experiences or of the emotional responses that are appropriate to them. This cognitive process is mediated by the emotional responses themselves, in

[70] Bennett [1981], 211–2.
[71] See Nussbaum [2001b].
[72] Nussbaum [2001b], 391.

accordance with Nussbaum's view that emotions fundamentally involve cognitions.[73]

Apart from its philological merits (which I am not sufficiently competent to feel at ease discussing), Nussbaum's interpretation provides a *prima facie* plausible account of the pleasures of tragedy. There certainly would seem to be cognitive gains to be expected from attending to tragedies. It is at least part of the reason why we are interested in tragedies that they help us understand something about the ways of the world and our own place in it as men and women living in it. Now, it is not implausible that these epistemic breakthroughs concern emotions and emotionally relevant objects and situations. After all, emotions are typically directed at objects and situations that we perceive as of the utmost concern for us. It is plausible that having unpleasant emotions to the plight of the tragedies' characters mediates, at least in part, our understanding of the pitiable and fearsome in that plight. I agree with Nussbaum that emotions fundamentally register certain cognitive truths about the world we are faced with.

However, as I have already argued in Chapter 2, the truths that disgust registers for us are of much more limited cognitive sophistication than those registered by other emotions, e.g. pity and fear. This is the phenomenon to which I have referred as disgust's 'unconsciousness of purpose'. In fact, the truths that disgust registers are typically limited to the recognition of the presence of certain things around us, contamination, and perhaps an obscure idea of an unspecified threat—in addition of course to less cognitive and more phenomenological aspects of the experience of disgust. Fear and pity are instead

[73] As expounded, most eminently, in Nussbaum [2001a].

programmed to register more articulate and significant cognitions: roughly speaking, those to do with danger to significant ones and negative experiences of significant ones. So the understanding or enlightenment that accompanies disgust is generally pretty limited. This makes an account of the Aristotle-Nussbaum kind less appealing for disgusting art than it is for tragedy (or other kinds of art that deal with emotions that register more substantial truths about the world). What disgust can do is, at most, to be enlightening as to the extent to which disgusting stuff exists, and the way it affects those who react to it with disgust. This is of more limited importance than what fear or pity can alert us to: these talk to us about further features of the fearsome and pitiful than their merely being what they are or their connection to human emotional sensitivities. Whatever appeal the Aristotle-Nussbaum solution may have for tragedy or for some other negatively valuable art, it is significantly less appealing for disgusting art.[74]

In Chapter 6 I will discuss in greater detail the kind of criticism just advanced that appeals to disgust's unconsciousness of purpose. This will play an important role in my assessment of Korsmeyer's account of disgusting art. Korsmeyer's account in fact resembles Aristotle-Nussbaum's in appealing to the power of emotions to register cognitive insight. Now I want to consider another, in a way more traditional interpretation of katharsis. This is the view that takes "purification" or "purgation" in, so to speak, a less cognitive sense than Nussbaum does. The relevant idea here is, in Marcia Eaton [1982]'s words,

[74] It might alternatively be suggested that disgust's unconsciousness of purpose in fact makes an Aristotle-Nussbaum katharsis account for disgust more appealing, rather than less. Other emotions, the alternative suggestion goes, already have cognitive clarity about their purposes and reasons. Since disgust does not, art might actually be of greater help in clarifying purposes and reasons of experiences of the disgusting kind. However, this suggestion is ill at ease with the in-principle inaccessibility to consciousness of disgust's purposes and reasons. Cf. also Chapter 2. I am grateful to Enrico Terrone for pointing out this possible alternative suggestion to me.

that "tragedy permits us to purge ourselves of bottled-up feelings".[75] Plausible as this account may sound in general terms, quite how this purgation might work is difficult to figure out.

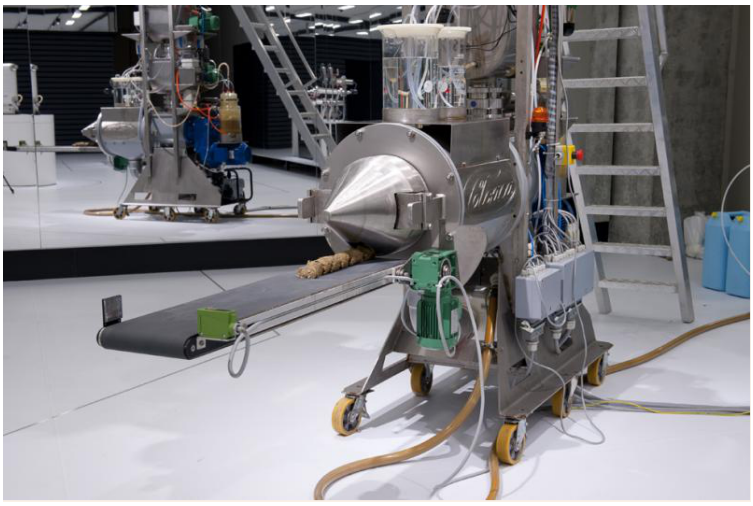
Let us dive straight into the case of disgust, leaving aside the issue of whether the account might be good for other emotions or feelings. Say I have been accumulating disgust, and this is hovering in my mind all the time, making me feel uneasy about my life.[76] (This disgust comes from, say, my flatmate's consistently untidy and unhygienic behaviour.) What good might I gain from going to see, say, a film that plays around disgusting situations with the aim of amusing? Consider for instance the comedies made by the Farrelly brothers (Peter and Robert), or films of a similar type, such as *Along Came Polly* [2004]. In this film the protagonist, Reuben Feffer, finds himself playing a basketball match with a big, hairy man, wearing no shirt and sweating profusely. In an attempt to block the big man from passing the ball, Reuben's face falls right into the sweaty, hairy chest of the man. Slow motion, detail shot of Reuben's face plunging into the man's chest, sweat spilling, Reuben's disgusted face. Why would watching a scene like this help me "purge" myself of my obnoxious underlining feelings of disgust? I can see how yet more disgust might *exacerbate* the disgust that I already, as it were, have within me. The contrary effect looks instead much less likely.

One might object that the desired effect can be achieved either through habituation to disgusting scenarios, which would in turn lead to desensitization, or through a more cognitive process of acceptance of disgust perhaps driven by the realization of the ubiquity of potential elicitors ("There's so much dis-

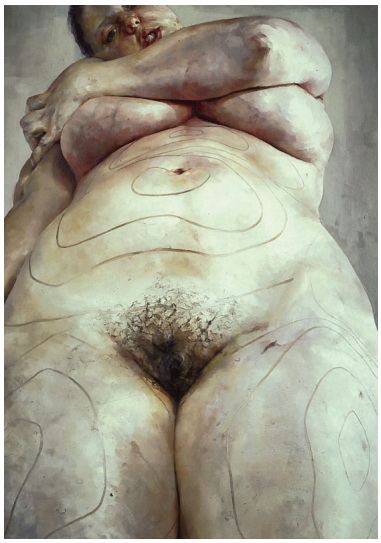
[75] Eaton [1982], 60.
[76] Thus I have tried to make sense of the metaphor "bottled-up feelings" in relation to disgust.

gustingness around that I'd better learn to live with it!"). But both of these options should be unappealing to a katharsis theorist. Desensitization through habituation really does not look like what katharsis must be about. Katharsis is generally considered to bring about a more salutary relationship with our emotions, and not to render us numb to them. The other, putative process results in our coming to terms, somehow, with feeling disgust as a necessary, or perhaps even desirable, part of the human experience. As wise and appealing as such a result sounds, it probably needs a more sophisticated reflection on the roles of disgust and its desirability than is afforded by such artworks as *Along Came Polly*.

By contrast, artworks that would seem to be better suited to achieve this latter result are more thoughtful, self-reflexive works such as the *Cloaca* machines [2000s], designed and built by the Belgian conceptual artist Wim Delvoye, or Jenny Saville's nudes of big women like *Plan* [1993]. Delvoye created working implementations of the human digestive apparatus, built on the model of industrial machinery. Through chemico-mechanical means, Delvoye's machines produce waste that closely resembles, in smell and form, human faeces. Among other things, these machines catalyse an audience's attention to the functional role of the body's excreta. They do so by de-anthropomorphizing the digestive process and producing a sort of synthetic version of human waste.



45. Wim Delvoye, *Cloaca* machine, 2000s



46. Jenny Saville, *Plan*, 1993

A similar reflection on disgusting things and our emotional reaction to them is afforded by Saville's *Plan*, a depiction of an overweight woman. The woman towers naked over the viewer. Her pubic hair stands closest to the viewer's perspectival viewpoint, a patch of black in stark contrast with the wide pinkish expanse of the rest of the woman's body. Here the obvious, albeit implicit, parallel is with the artistic tradition of idealized nude figures (the "smoothly blown corporeal of the beautiful body", in Menninghaus [2003]'s memorable

phrase).[77] The differences between this tradition and Saville's painting puzzle the viewer—at least if they are male—surprised to have a disgusted reaction to a subject that they had learnt to scrutinize under a certain understanding of the beautiful and, if successful, to welcome with pleasure. In this way, the viewer's disgust itself becomes the object of scrutiny. Highly unusual as a reaction to the traditional nude painting, and yet also perfectly predictable given the subject matter, Saville's woman is overweight, but she is not a freak. In a sense, she is an ordinary woman, neither very attractive nor ugly, neither minute nor obese; she looks very real (so much so that the painting can be confused for a photograph). Yet, disgust at certain features of nudity is a reaction with which everyone should be very familiar. Pivoting around the viewer's disgusted response, Saville's painting makes them question various aspects of the relationships between convention and nature, and between art and reality. In fact, the characteristically aesthetic achievement of Saville's paintings of this series is to create, disgust notwithstanding, a memorable hybrid photographed/painted, real/dreamed figure of a woman.

To an extent, works such as Delvoye's and Saville's have the potential to achieve the kind of acceptance of disgust required by the version of katharsis under consideration. However, I am not sure whether they ultimately do, and I have some (defeasible) reservations. Katharsis as a cognitive process of acceptance, in fact, resembles the result that psychotherapeutic treatment of certain phobias or anxiety conditions like obsessive-compulsive disorder is set upon achieving. The clinical consensus at the moment is that cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) is the most effective approach to the treatment

[77] Menninghaus [2003], 299.

of such conditions. As effective as CBT is, however, it still requires quite a lot of time (a minimum of 4 or 5 sessions with a therapist for the mildest of conditions), effort (help of a trained therapist, determination and active co-operation of the patient, frequently repetition of certain exposure and response prevention exercises at home) as well as (in many cases) numerous trials and errors.[78] As powerful and sophisticated as a work of art can be, it still seems unlikely to match the results that can be achieved through such an effortful process as the one undertaken in CBT.

It will be objected that the effort required by CBT is only necessary because CBT deals with clinical conditions. Art instead offers an effective means of purgation in more everyday cases of emotional impasse. But I remain doubtful of art's therapeutical powers in these matters. It seems to me that the cognitive benefits that art brings about are typically benefits of a more intellectual nature than the solution of a particular emotional imbalance occurring in an appreciator at the moment of engagement with the work. Of course, during one's engagement with art one may occasionally learn something that bears some relevance to one's current personal issues. But this is only generally a matter of individual, idiosyncratic appreciation.

What I think should be learned from the foregoing discussion of katharsis is twofold: (1) at least as it is more frequently interpreted, katharsis is not an especially compelling account of the appeal of most disgusting art; (2) a better account could be found by downgrading the cognitive ambitions of the appreciation of disgusting art from the high levels to which some influential interpretations of katharsis aim.

[78] Cf. Olatunji and McKay [2009].

9. A different version of integrationism from katharsis, which is worth exploring for further insights, is conversion. On Levinson [2006]'s categorization, conversion is in a class of its own ("conversionary explanations").[79] But, at least as far as the version of conversion that I will consider here goes, viz. David Hume [1757/1777]'s account of the pleasure afforded by tragedy, conversion is an integrationist account—at least as interpreted in the way that I do.[80] On Hume's conversion account, the negative component provides its impetus to the positive component, making it stronger.

Hume's account has been variously understood by different exegetes. Hume himself was not in fact a model of clarity or precision in expounding it.[81] Because of the uncertainty as to what Hume's view really amounts to, as well as for certain of its features (on some of its interpretations), Hume's conversion account has had a bad press for a while. In contemporary analytic aesthetics, the majority of commentators seem to consider it as either very mysterious or as downright implausible. I will show a way to interpret Hume's conversion account that makes it, granted its flaws, a much less mysterious or implausible candidate solution to the paradox of negative emotions.

Hume distinguishes between two components of a good, or "well-wrote" tragedy:[82] the events represented and the way in which they are represented. Roughly speaking, this distinction boils down to the distinction between form and content. On the one hand, the sad plight of Othello, whose happiness is destroyed by bad confidantes and by his jealousy; on the other Shakespeare's

[79] Levinson [2006], 52–3.
[80] In the notorious *Ambitious Stepmother* passage, Hume [1757/1777] offers an example of a disgusting tragedy; cf. Chapter 1 for a discussion of the passage.
[81] In fact, some have even argued that Hume himself was not completely clear on certain important details or consequences of his view; see Amyas Merivale [2011], 268–9.
[82] Hume [1757/1777], 1, Mil 216.

eloquence, the arrangement of the scenes, the actors' bravura, their costumes etc. These two components respectively generate in the spectator two opposite "movements", or component parts of the experience: one unpleasant, and the other pleasurable. According to Hume, the pleasurable component overwhelms the unpleasant one because it is more vigorous or intense than the former. As a result, Hume says, "the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced [...] but the whole impulse of those passions is converted into pleasure, and swells the delight which the eloquence raises in us".[83]

Hume's process of conversion eliminates any unpleasantness caused by the tragedy's events and redirects the impetus that accompanies the unpleasantness into the positive stream, thus heightening the pleasure enjoyed by the spectators. That conversion should happen is for Hume simply a fact of human psychology, which he states in its general form both in *A Treatise of Human Nature*[84] and in *A Dissertation on the Passions*. This is the relevant passage from the *Dissertation*:

> It is a property in human nature, that any emotion, which attends a passion, is easily converted into it; though in their natures they be originally different from, and even contrary to each other. [...] [W]hen two passions are already produced by their separate causes, and are both present in the mind, they readily mingle and unite [...] The predominant passion swallows up the inferior, and converts it into itself. The spirits, when once excited, easily receive a change in their direction; and it is natural to imagine, that this change will

[83] Hume [1757/1777], 9, Mil 219.
[84] Hume [1739–40], 2.3.4.2, Selby-Bigge & Nidditch edition (SBN) 420.

come from the prevailing affection.[85]

One problem that some commentators have had with Hume's account is the sketchiness of his description of the mechanics of conversion. On one interpretation, conversion comes across as a highly problematic phenomenon; otherwise, its mechanics are seen as utterly mysterious. The interpretation in question views the conversion of the unpleasant component into the pleasurable as effectively involving a *transformation* of sorts of one emotion into another.[86] An affective metamorphosis of this kind, on the face of things, is an odd phenomenon. Hedonic valence, positive or negative, seems an intrinsic property of an emotion. This means that an unpleasant emotion cannot be had without experiencing some unplesantness. As Malcolm Budd [1991] argues, Hume's account "applies only to spectators who undergo negative emotions without in any way suffering, which seems impossible if unpleasantness is intrinsic to the experience of these emotions and these emotions are experienced in a full-blooded form in response to what is represented".[87]

In fact, Hume himself, in the *Treatise*, espouses a view of (at least some of) the passions as necessarily having the peculiar hedonic charge that they have.[88] For instance, Hume says that:

> 'Tis easy to observe, that the passions, both direct and indirect, are founded on pain and pleasure [...] Upon the removal of pain and pleasure there immediately follows a removal of love and hatred, pride

[85] Hume [1757], 6.2, Beauchamp edition (Bea) 26.
[86] See Budd [1991]: "[Hume] must attempt to explain how a negative emotion is transformed into a positive emotion" (93). Budd's view is more nuanced than this sentence might suggest, as I will point out shortly. See also Schier [1989]: "the solution which Hume offers to the paradox of tragedy aims to explain the metamorphosis of painful terror into pleasant terror" (15; cit. in Neill [1998], 338).
[87] Budd [1991], 103.
[88] Cf. Neill [1998], 339–40.

> and humility, desire and aversion, and of most of our reflective or secondary impressions.[89]

Elsewhere in the *Treatise*, Hume also claims things like: "admiration [...] is always agreeable", "pity is an uneasiness", and "pride is a pleasant sensation, and humility a painful; and upon the removal of pleasure and pain, there is in reality no pride nor humility".[90] Of course, it is possible that, while writing "Of Tragedy", Hume had abandoned the views previously outlined in the *Treatise* about the essential connection between the passions and their hedonic valence. Nonetheless, nothing Hume says in "Of Tragedy" would obviously support the latter speculation.

One could suggest that the negative emotions aroused by tragedy are not full-blooded emotions, but a modified version of the corresponding negative emotions that one experiences in response to real-life situations. The crucial feature of this modified version of emotions would be their capacity to trigger some of the usual forms of behaviour typical of their real-life counterparts (in the case at hand: tears, sobs and cries), foregoing the (unpleasant) hedonic charge which would normally accompany them. Setting aside the issue of whether experiencing such a modified version of emotion is a real possibility, though, this kind of suggestion does not capture what Hume has in mind, since he appears to be talking of real-life, garden-variety emotions. In fact, Hume talks of "sorrow", "compassion" etc., without ever adding any further specifications.

So, Budd's criticism might seem to be on target. It is worth noticing that

[89] Hume [1739–40], 2.3.9.1, SBN 438.
[90] Hume [1739–40], 2.2.8.4, SBN 374, 2.2.9.1, SBN 381, and 2.1.5.4, SBN 286.

it is actually not an uncontroversial view of emotions one which holds that hedonic valence is a necessary feature of emotions. One thing that the contemporary debate on the definition of emotion shows is how difficult it is to say anything general, with any reasonable degree of confidence, on what component parts are necessary or sufficient for something to be an emotion. Cognitive theorists for instance will typically deny that emotions must in all cases come with a felt component. In fact, this is a claim that even someone who is not a hard-core cognitivist might consent to. In some cases, emotions are not accompanied by feelings of pleasantness or unpleasantness. Think for example of dispositional emotions, love for instance, which might be dispositionally operating even when it does not occurrently manifest itself with pleasure or displeasure. Someone who subscribed to this claim would therefore easily be able to rebutt Budd's criticism, on the grounds that unpleasantness is not intrinsic to negative emotions, and hence that undergoing negative emotions without feeling any unpleasantness is not impossible. However, such a rebuttal would be short-lived, for a very similar criticism to Budd's own can—more clearly than Budd himself does—appeal to the full-bloodedness of the typical audience's experience of tragedy. Typical spectators of tragedies have a felt, occurrent and (almost) full-blooded experience of the tragic emotions (except that they do not exhibit some of the behaviours that typically accompany real-life emotions, such as running away from dangerous scenarios before them). By contrast, the counter-examples that one can provide against an intrinsic connection between hedonic valence and emotions involve non-felt, non-occurrent or otherwise atypical instances of emotions.

In characterizing the audience's response to tragedy, moreover, Hume does not only talk of negative emotions (sorrow, compassion etc.), but talks more

specifically of the *unpleasantness* associated with those emotions. In presenting what he claims are the seemingly unaccountable pleasures of tragedy, Hume claims of spectators that:

> The more they are *touched* and *affected*, the more are they delighted with the spectacle, and as soon as the *uneasy* passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end. [...] They are pleased in proportion as they are *afflicted*; and never are so happy as when they employ *tears*, *sobs*, and *cries* to give vent to their sorrow, and relieve their heart, *swoln* with the tenderest sympathy and compassion.[91]

Not only are spectators of tragedies pained by the events they see (or read) represented, but their pain is so strong that it swells their hearts and makes them sob and cry. In fact, how else would the impetus of the negative component arise if no unpleasantness accompanied the emotions? Hume's account of how these "movements" arise is not sufficiently detailed to provide a definite answer to the latter question, but I think it would seem plausible to assume that, at least in the case of the kind of negative passions at issue here, it is the unpleasantness of these passions that somehow determines (in part, at least) the nature of the associated movements.

Given all of the evidence against the plausibility of a view like the one that Budd attributes to Hume, it is reasonable to stop for a moment and reflect on the appropriateness of the interpretation. It is fair to Hume to apply some charity to his text, at least *pro tempore*, and look harder for an alternative, more coherent interpretation. One interpretation which strikes a better balance between textual faithfulness and charitability is advanced by Alex Neill [1998].

[91] Hume [1757/1777], 1, Mil 217; emphases mine.

Motivated by some of the textual evidence just mentioned, Neill interprets Hume as endorsing a conversion process in which the audience is to some extent pained by the spectacle, but has an *overall* pleasurable experience.

An essential role in Neill's interpretation is played by his attributing to Hume a distinction between "passions" and "emotions". Recall the passage from the *Dissertation on the Passions* in which Hume describes affective conversion. It starts with: "It is a property in human nature, that any emotion, which attends a passion..."; this assumes that "emotions" and "passions" are not the same thing: one *attends* the other. Elsewhere, in the *Treatise* and in the *Dissertation*, Hume also talks of passions as *preceding* and *producing* emotion;[92] he points out that passions do more than merely causing an emotion: "love and hatred are not compleated within themselves, nor rest in that emotion, which they produce";[93] he suggests that passions cause more or less emotion, depending on what passions they are: "there are certain calm desires and tendencies, which, tho' they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind";[94] and sometimes they produce very little emotion if any at all: "when a passion has once become a settled principle of action [...] it directs the actions and conduct without that opposition and emotion which so naturally attend every momentary gust of passion".[95]

Since 'passion' and 'emotion', for Hume, stand for two distinct entities, Neill is able to construct an interpretation of the process of conversion in tragedy which properly predicates conversion only of (certain components of) the emotion accompanying the negative passions—and not of the passions themselves.

[92] Hume [1739–40], 2.3.5.2, SBN 423; Hume [1757], 3.6, Bea 19.
[93] Hume [1757], 3.6, Bea 19.
[94] Hume [1739–40], 2.3.3.8, SBN 417.
[95] Hume [1739–40], 2.3.4.1, SBN 419.

Contra Budd, there is no literal conversion of one passion into another, no spooky transformation of something into something different with incompatible intrinsic properties. Once the vehemence of the negative emotion changes direction and goes to strengthen the positive component, Neill suggests, the negative passions are made less forceful. But they do not disappear: "conversion leaves the negative passions in place".[96] This has the additional benefit of making Hume's account less vulnerable to another objection that Budd [1991] and others raise to it. According to this objection, Hume's account would be incompatible with the reports of many a spectator of tragedies, who describe their experiences as involving both pleasure *and* unpleasantness. However "smoothed, and softened, and mollified"[97] the negative passions are in an audience's experience of tragedy, they are nonetheless felt as unpleasant.

As I mentioned, I think Neill's interpretation is preferable to Budd's because it strikes a better balance between textual faithfulness and charity to Hume. However, neither interpretation accommodates all of the textual evidence available (considering "Of Tragedy", alongside the *Treatise* and the *Dissertation on the Passions*). Directly against Budd are all of the passages in "Of Tragedy" that suggest the presence of unpleasantness in tragedy's experience; more indirectly, the passages in the other (both earlier and later) relevant texts, in which Hume claims an intrinsic connection between passions and their hedonic valence. On the other hand, Neill cannot accommodate the passage in which Hume talks of the annihilation of the unpleasantness of the negative passions: "the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is [...] overpowered and effaced by

[96] Neill [1998], 347.
[97] Hume [1757/1777], 19, Mil 223.

something stronger of an opposite kind".[98]

The passages that mark a distinction between "emotion" and "passion" do make room for a less theoretically problematic account than the one Budd attributes to Hume. But, in fact, if one looks more closely at Budd's interpretation, one finds that it is more nuanced that I have so far presented it. Budd does claim that Hume *effectively* invokes a spooky transformation of an unpleasant emotion into a pleasant one. Nonetheless, he also accepts something like Neill's distinction between "passion" and "emotion"; he says that:

> Hume appears to operate with two different, although related, notions of the strength of an emotion: (i) the degree of ease or unease with which it is experienced, and (ii) the vehemence of the "movements" of the emotion.[99]

Budd's precise view then is that, for Hume, the negative emotions elicited by a tragedy are deprived of their unpleasantness and their vehemence is rechanneled into the positive emotion. On Budd's reading, this process effectively amounts to a transformation of a negative emotion into a positive one. So Budd need not be troubled by the existence in Hume of a distinction between two components of affective experience. He can accept the distinction between two components of affective experience, whilst at the same time claiming that what the process effectively achieves is an implausible feat of affective transformation.

In itself, the distinction between "passion" and "emotion" is not conclusive reason, even from the point of view of theoretical—as opposed to textual—plausibility for preferring Neill's interpretation over Budd's. Once Budd's in-

[98] Hume [1757/1777], 9, Mil 220.
[99] Budd [1991], 101.

terpretation is seen in its nuanced form, the theoretical advantages of Neill's interpretation over Budd's come in sharper focus. It is the fate of the negative, weaker passions what makes a difference. What must be avoided is to have a passion felt without its intrinsic hedonic valence. By contrast, vehemence, impulse, force etc. of a passion—in short, the "emotion" with the passion associated—seem more plausibly apt at undergoing hedonic changes, because they are not conceptually tied to a particular hedonic valence. At least, it is easier to give an account of "emotion"—than one of "passion"—in which it exists independently of any hedonic valence. With this in mind, it should be evident that the main problem with Budd's proposal is not that it advocates a *conversion* of hedonic valence of the negative passion—because it doesn't if one considers its nuanced version—but that it advocates the *muting* of the negative passions' hedonic valence. As Budd says, Hume's "idea appears to be that the spectator *never experiences* the unpleasantness".[100] Neill's account avoids Budd's problem by stating that the negative passions remain in place and keep their unpleasantness, although the subtraction of supporting "emotion" causes some reduction in their degree of unpleasantness.

From a textual point of view, the distinction between "passion" and "emotion" is not decisive either. To be sure, the vast majority of the time—including in the most eminently located passages—Hume talks of a conversion of "emotions" or "movements" either into each other or into "passions". Nonetheless, he also occasionally talks of conversion or transformation of "passions" into other "passions". In fact, he does so in two passages.

In a passage of "Of Tragedy" he discusses Shakespeare's *Othello*. Rather

[100] Budd [1991], 98.

than discussing it explicitly as an example of tragedy, however, he makes the point that jealousy and curiosity have the same relationship as the negative and positive components in tragedy generally. Othello's jealousy is made more vehement by Iago's strategy of exciting his curiosity through hints at first, but delaying an explicit revelation. Othello's curiosity builds up and gets stronger, and its strength is then converted into his jealousy once he is finally revealed the truth. As Hume says, "the subordinate passion is here readily transformed into the predominant one".[101]

Earlier than that, Hume also talks of a conversion from a passion into another passion, in the second part of a passage from the *Dissertation* that I quoted earlier (also present almost *verbatim* in the *Treatise*):

> The predominant passion swallows up the inferior, and converts it into itself.[102]

In this passage he is again not directly referring to tragedy, but to the general phenomenon of human psychology which is implemented in tragedy. Note also that the passage comes just a few lines after the more standard formulation of the principle of conversion, according to which: "It is a property in human nature, that any emotion, which attends a passion, is easily converted into it".[103]

To recapitulate, Neill's interpretation of Hume on tragedy is preferable theoretically because it allows Hume to escape the charge of postulating a pain-free experience of negative emotions. Such a charge is damning for two reasons: (1) because it conflicts with a *prima facie* plausible view of emotions as well

[101] Hume [1757/1777], 13, Mil 221.
[102] Hume [1757], 6.2, Bea 26.
[103] Hume [1757], 6.2, Bea 26.

as with Hume's own theory of emotions as he presents it in the *Treatise* and in the *Dissertation on the Passions*, and (2) because it makes the source of what Hume calls "emotion" or "movement" utterly mysterious. Neill's account is also textually preferable insofar as it can easily, whilst Budd's cannot, accommodate the passages of "Of Tragedy" in which Hume talks rather explicitly of tragedy's spectators as experiencing unpleasantness.

However, Neill's account is ill at ease with the first part of the eminently located passage from "Of Tragedy" where Hume formulates for the first time and with greatest explicitness his account of the seemingly unaccountable pleasure afforded by good tragedies: "the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is [...] overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind".[104] Neill does account for a reduction of unpleasantness in the negative passions, which, he claims, is a consequence of the "movements" being plucked away from their association with the negative passions and redirected towards supporting the positive ones instead. This reduction of unpleasantness is, according to Neill, "what Hume means when he says that in our experience of good tragedy the negative passions are "smoothed, and softened, and mollified"".[105] However, the passage that Neill quotes in this respect does not lend support to his view. Whereas "overpowered and effaced" explicitly refers to what happens to the negative passions when conversion occurs, negative passions are for Hume "smoothed, and softened, and mollified" before conversion takes place, or in any case independently of its taking place, and as a result of their being elicited by fictional/absent, as opposed to real objects and events. Here it is worth quoting Hume's entire sentence:

[104] Hume [1757/1777], 9, Mil 220.
[105] Neill [1998], 347.

> The passion, though, perhaps, naturally, and when excited by the simple appearance of a real object, it may be painful; yet is so smoothed, and softened, and mollified when raised by the finer arts, that it affords the highest entertainment.[106]

Although (characteristically) not completely unambiguous, the passage makes a clear reference to the difference between emotions elicited by a "real object" and by "the finer arts". Conversion cannot have anything to do with that difference except for the fact that it prepares the ground for conversion. It does so by making the negative passions feeble enough—to begin with—to be overpowered, and effaced, by the positive passions or movements aroused by the tragedy's formal features.

Neither Budd's nor Neill's interpretations can accommodate all of the textual evidence. As Hume describes it, the process of conversion in tragedy involves two parts: the first is the extinction of the unpleasantness of the negative, weaker passions and the second is *conversion proper* to the negative "emotion" associated with the negative passions. The process is triggered by the simultaneous occurrence of two opposite affective pulls, of uneven strengths. This is in virtue of the way our minds work, says Hume. Conversion must be a causal process, then. The alternative interpretation that I propose is the following. A causal process involves two stages: the cause and the effect. In (well-written) tragedy, the first stage is the presence of two affective "movements" in the spectators' minds (i.e. the pleasure of the form and the unpleasantness of the content). This is experienced by the tragedy's spectators for a bit, and this triggers the process of conversion; in other words it causes the onset of a second

[106] Hume [1757/1777], 19, Mil 223.

stage. The second stage of the causal process of conversion is divided into the two parts earlier mentioned: extinction of the unpleasantness of the negative passions and conversion proper.

The extinction of the negative passions' unpleasantness does not happen through any spooky feat of hedonic engineering but is simply caused by the extinction of those passions. The greater strength of the simultaneously occurring positive component (in the first stage) causes the extinction of the negative passions (in the second stage). So, the negative passions experienced in tragedy are unpleasant, and are experienced as such. But they then are effaced, because overpowered by concurring positive emotions. However, the impulse, vehemence or force of the "emotion" caused—in the first stage—by the negative passions, survives—in the second stage—the extinction of those passions and goes to support the only affective pull left—i.e. the positive one. Re-direction of the impulse initially associated with the negative passions is what Hume metaphorically calls 'conversion'. His choice of words should not surprise: figurative speech is used all the time in philosophy. Here 'conversion' is one concise way to describe the re-direction (another metaphor!).

This does not mean that spectators need to wait until the end of the tragedy to experience its distinctive pleasures. Nothing prevents the process of conversion to typically occur multiple times in the course of a single tragedy. Every time an event, the aspect of an event, a feature of the play, or the spectators' imagination or memory prompts or re-awakens a negative emotion, the process of conversion will start again.

In fact, Hume's tragic conversion cannot be anything else but a two-stage, temporally extended process, if it has to be a *causal* process. If conversion in tragedy is a causal process, and since effects follow their causes, the process

must have two stages, one temporally subsequent to the other.[107]

Once tragic conversion is seen as a two-stage process in the way that I have suggested, it stops sounding as such a mysterious or implausible phenomemon as it may have sounded at first. In fact, it accounts for the roller-coaster of emotions that spectators of tragedy, and in fact appreciators of most narrative forms of art that deal with negative emotions, undergo. Unpleasantness and pleasure are both components of the appreciators' experience and each gets hold of their attention in turn. And the strength and vehemence caused by the unpleasantness contributes to the strength of the pleasure that the work affords.[108]

However, a reason for being dissatisfied, or at least not completely satisfied, with Hume's conversion account (as I have interpreted it) is that the process is said to happen as a consequence of the mere co-occurrence of positive and negative components of uneven hedonic strength. The negative components, or their vehemence, get re-directed to support the positive ones, in virtue of an un-analysed feature of the human mind. Conversion just happens in the way Hume describes, when two emotions of unequal force, produced by separate causes, are felt at (more or less) the same time. However, mere co-occurrence does not seem sufficient for conversion to happen. At least on the face of it, for instance, one can be saddened by a murder that has just happened in a novel one is reading, while in the back of one's mind one is intrigued at how some twist in the plot led to the murder. These two affective movements can co-exist without the predominant component "overpowering and effacing" the

[107] I am very grateful to Keith Allen for this point.
[108] Crucially on the basis of earlier drafts of this section, Merivale [2011] has offered a similar interpretation of Hume's tragic conversion.

subordinate, or the vehemence of one component being re-directed into the other.

Something else about the particular relationship between one and the other component's features (including their causes) is going to make a decisive difference as to whether something like conversion takes place. Mere co-occurrence will not suffice. Another reason for dissatisfaction with Hume's conversion account is the emphasis that it puts on literary form and on the pleasures this is (supposedly) capable of affording. It is hard to see how much pleasure one can (typically) really get from form alone (even if the latter is understood as including features of the performance as well as of the text, and *pace* anyone who endorsed formalism). Yet, on Hume's account this pleasure has to be so great to overpower the discomfort caused by attending to the represented events. In fact, as has been noted, pleasure in human suffering and misfortune of the kind that "well-wrote" tragedies afford is afforded in very similar ways by much less formally well-crafted art: popular literature, TV soap operas etc.[109]

Certainly, these cases may be in part a result of differences in different people's artistic sensibility, or in their capacity to appreciate formal artistic value. But this cannot be the whole, or even the main part of the explanatory story. For one thing, the interest, if not pleasure, elicited by popular literature, soap operas and the like certainly does not fall on deaf ears on the sophisticated art appreciator—although she certainly is much less impressed by it. At the source of this interest or pleasure, there is something about the very witnessing of events of a certain kind, whether or not the witnessing or the events are fictional.

[109] See Neill [1999].

Once again, then, Hume's account characterizes the two affective components in the pre-conversion stage as less intimately connected than they plausibly are. For one thing, the two components would need to be in a closer relationship than mere co-occurrence in order for anything like conversion to be triggered. Moreover, the causes of the pleasurable and unpleasant components are not (always) so neatly divided as Hume tells us, into, respectively, the form and the content of the tragic representation. In particular, the pleasure arises in the first instance, and before anything like conversion happens, from something that is not merely formal.

However, the insight of Hume's account into the pleasures of negatively emotional art is really the thought that phenomenological features of the unpleasant emotions somehow enhance other, more pleasureable aspects of the experience of attending to the work. This insight needs to be preserved, even though the mechanics of the transference of such an impetus on to the pleasure need to be better described than Hume has. All of this is true of disgusting art, as I will show in Chapter 6 in expounding my views on disgust's indirect contribution to aesthetic value. Before I get to that, there are still a few more alternative accounts to discuss.

10. Two frequent contributions of disgust to artistic value are worth sketching at this point. I am not sure that these are sufficiently detailed to amount to *accounts* of the value of disgusting art. Nor am I sure that these contributions, as they are sketched here, necessarily fall into any single classificatory label. It is more likely that they will enable co-existentialist, integrationist etc. accounts, depending on how they play out in each artwork. However, they are widespread uses of disgust in art. The first concerns the sizeable part that disgust and the disgusting play in human life. If art, especially narrative art, wants to tell

stories about us or that matter to us, then sometimes it will have to engage with disgust. For example, recounting the horrors or war, or everyday life in medieval cities, or the world of surgeons and doctors, especially if realistically, may well require portraying the disgusting and often eliciting disgust. This is something that both the artist and appreciator will in some instances value (for instance because they value realism).

Another frequent use of disgust is to create shock or as an attention-grabber. In some such cases disgust is deployed in order to direct an appreciator's attention to certain valuable aspects of the artwork that might have otherwise been less obvious. In other, cruder instances, shock is itself valued or valuable. Both kinds of use are recurrent in what might be called 'provocative art'. I am referring here for instance to certain works by "young British artists", such as Damien Hirst.[110]

11. Two further accounts can be called, following Levinson [2006]'s classification, *revisionary* and *deflationary* accounts. I start with deflationary accounts. Such accounts reject the assumption that what we experience with works of art are real-life, garden-variety negative emotions. Instead, our art-appreciative experience only involves pleasurable emotional reactions of a different sort (either aesthetic analogues of real-life negative emotions, or quasi-emotions, or nothing remotely like negative emotions at all).

Deflationary accounts are not convincing, for two (closely related) reasons. One reason is that, as far as we ourselves can tell, our experiences as art appreciators just are remarkably similar to our emotional experiences in real-

[110] Hirst's *A Thousand Years* [1990] is a good case in point here. Cashell [2009] offers interpretations of Hirst's and other yBa's work, which appeal to the notion of *shock*. Cf. Chapter 4 for more on such provocative art.

life situations. Sure, we enjoy our art experiences a lot of the time, even when they involve (alleged) negative emotions; and, sure, some of our behaviour in response to these experiences is not consonant with the behaviour that most of us would follow were we involved in an analogous real-life situation (we do not, say, try to stop The Bad Guy from stealing money from The Good Guy). But we do ordinarily talk of fear, anger, disgust etc. in describing our responses to the relevant artworks. We do often react with behaviour that is consonant with real-life analogues: we make the same facial expressions, we have the same physiological reactions, we appraise artistically represented events as scary, infuriating, disgusting etc. when the real-life analogues would be scary, infuriating etc.

This brings me to the second difficulty that deflationary solutions face.[111] The deflationary theorist is entitled to deny of her own experience as an art appreciator that it is actually sufficiently different from her real-life emotional life. However, the positive alternative characterization that she gives of her experience, whatever it is, will face the following problem. According to the most plausible account currently available, basic emotions such as fear, anger, and disgust are neurophysiologically hard-wired mechanisms (or "programmes") in humans.[112] They consist of a set of relatively fixed features, which pertain to appraisal, facial expression, neurological mediators (most importantly in the limbic system), etc. The fixity of these emotional mechanisms explains what I have described as the remarkable consonance between relevant art-appreciative

[111] As it will be evident, this difficulty only concerns artistic responses that involve basic emotions (or whatever the deflationary theorist wants to substitute for that). However, if the deflationary story is not convincing for basic emotions, then it is unlikely that it will be convincing for other emotions. Whatever strength that story has seems to me to be clearly dependent on its generality.

[112] Cf. e.g. Griffiths [1997]. Cf. also Chapter 2.

experiences and emotional experiences to counterpart real-life scenarios.

Such fixity is compatible with the existence of some differences between artistic and real-life emotional experiences. Although hard-wired, the human basic-emotional programmes are integrated into highly complex organisms. So, naturally, part of the output of the emotional programmes that reaches the level of behavioural response or of conscious awareness will be also a product of the interaction between the relatively fixed affective programme and other component parts of the human organism—cognitive, physiological, emotional etc. Let us say, for simplicity's sake, that the behavioural response that is typical of the fear programme involves following fight-or-flight patterns of behaviour. Accepting this does not entail a commitment to saying that all instances of fear must be followed by fight-or-flight behaviour. The way that a complex organism like the human works is such that the behavioural response to relevant situations will be modulated according to various other factors besides the patterns inscribed in basic-emotional programmes.

Whilst the opponent of deflationary theories can readily help herself to the story just sketched, the deflationary theorist is going to have a much harder time explaining why a few differences in emotional response between the real-life and art cases justify the positing of new basic-emotional kinds, in addition to the ones that empirical science tells us we are hard-wired to experience.

The deflationary account that has the best chances of raising to the challenge here is an account in terms of something similar to the alleged mental states that Kendall Walton [1990] calls "quasi-emotions".[113] Quasi-emotions resemble, and

[113] Walton [1990] does not take a clear stance on the paradox of negative emotions. Within the same chapter (7), he advances the deflationary solution I outline here, but also a different, revisionary account. For convenience's sake, I will talk of "quasi-emotions" in what follows, on the understanding that these are not necessarily exactly like Walton's quasi-emotions and that Walton may not actually endorse the deflationary

differ from, garden-variety emotions in all the ways in which (for the opponent of deflationary theories) our emotional responses to the art and real-life cases resemble, and differ from, each other. In particular, a deflationary solution appealing to quasi-emotions solves the paradox of negatively emotional art by maintaining that what we experience in art are negative quasi-emotions and that these are actually pleasurable.[114]

The following is a story about basic (quasi-)emotions that is compatible with such an account. An art appreciator appropriately has a particular quasi-emotion every time the corresponding real-life emotion would be appropriately had by an emoter in an analogous, but real-life scenario. To the extent that she has control over what quasi-emotional state she finds herself in, the art appreciator can put herself in a state that mimicks the state in which she would be were she faced with the analogous real-life scenario.[115]

But this story assumes too much control on the art appreciator's part upon her (quasi-)emotional responses. Consider for instance facial micro-expressions (sometimes called 'micros'). These are involuntary components of the standard behavioural output of basic emotions. They typically appear for a fraction of a second, only after which the emoter can easily modify her facial expression at will. So, for instance, certain Japanese politeness rules prohibit the display of facial expressions of disgust in presence of an authority figure. In conformity

account discussed. Cf. also following footnotes.

[114] Again, whether these are exactly like Waltonian quasi-emotions is debatable. Most of the time Walton emphasizes the existence of motivational and behavioural—as opposed to physiological or phenomenological—differences between emotions and quasi-emotions.

[115] Again, this is probably not a story that Walton would be happy to endorse, although it is not easy to tell with certainty. His quasi-emotions theory is mysterious in important respects, one of which precisely concerns the extent to which an art appreciator is in control of her quasi-emotions. Walton is not completely clear on this but seems to lean towards her being not very much in control. He says for instance about movies that the responses they normally elicit are "to a considerable extent beyond the control of the viewer" (Walton [1991], 415).

with this, showing disgusting videos to Japanese subjects will typically elicit micro-expressions of disgust. (These will only be detectable on slowed-down videotapes of the subjects' reactions, but not at the naked eye.)[116] Although the videos that these subjects are shown may not exactly be classifiable as artworks (or as works of fiction), one can assume that other, more obviously artistic videos will elicit similar reactions. The basic affective programme of disgust (as well as, in all likelihood, the other programmes) does get activated in responses to art.

To defend her claim, the defender of the particular deflationary account discussed here will say that quasi-emotions are not the sole affective response appreciators have to art. Walton himself says something along these lines when he suggests that the imaginative experience of the appreciator of artistic fictions does not only involve quasi-emotions, but

> is likely to involve other emotions as well, possibly including fear. Participating in the game may induce or revive genuine fears of real life dangers, dangers that the fictional slime somehow reminds her of. And she may feel genuine emotions toward the movie, toward the *portrayal* of the slime. She may be disgusted or shocked or amazed by it—or even afraid of it.[117]

To understand the deflationary theorist here, it is important to keep in mind that her motivation comes from the desire to solve the paradox of fictional emotions. It is therefore important to her that occurrences of genuine

[116] In writing up this chapter, I could not retrieve the paper that presents the research on Japanese subjects' disgust micros. Ekman [1972] presents the experiments suggesting that Japanese display rules hinder expressions of disgust in the presence of an authority figure. The phenomenon of micros in the simple terms in which I have described it is very well established for basic emotions; cf. Ekman [2009], 129ff. for an overview.
[117] Walton [1991], 413; his emphasis.

emotions be, as Walton specifies, either products of mental association or directed at non-fictional objects (e.g. "the movie" itself). However, in virtue of the ideational character of disgust, the art appreciator's disgust (in the scenario that Walton describes) would be typically directed at the fictional slime itself (as portrayed in the film), rather than at pictures of it on the cinema screen. Moreover, emotions elicited through private mental associations are not the kind of emotional response which typically goes into constituting the appropriate response to an artwork, or in which an ideal art appreciator will typically find a work's artistic merit. It is therefore hard to see why one should embrace quasi-emotions, when all plausibility accrues to an account of emotional response to art in terms of genuine emotions (although one that is minimally more liberal than a narrowly cognitivist framework within which nothing short of beliefs justifies emotion elicitation).

12. *Revisionary* accounts deny that negative emotions are necessarily unpleasant. In particular, negative emotions whose intentional objects are not negatively evaluated need not be unpleasant, and can in fact even be savoured with pleasure.[118] Emotions felt towards fictions or representations, according to proponents of these revisionary solutions, fall into this category.

Berys Gaut [1993] is the most prominent proponent of such an account. He proposes that negative value and unpleasantness are not necessarily, but only typically connected with one another. On Gaut's preferred cognitive account of the emotions, an emotion—say fear—is individuated by the evaluation that the subject provides of its object—say the negative evaluation according to which something is dangerous for me or mine. According to Gaut, such an evaluation

[118] Obviously, such accounts only work for the smaller class of negatively emotional art, and not for negatively valuable art more generally.

is conceptually connected to a response of pleasure or displeasure, in terms of typical human behaviour. The connection is the following. When something is positively or negatively evaluated, it is typically regarded as desirable or undesirable. When something is desirable or undesirable, its realization is typically accompanied by pleasure or displeasure. Therefore, typically, when something is positively/negatively evaluated, its realization brings pleasure/displeasure with it.[119]

However, this connection leaves room for atypical cases, one of which is supposed to be that of negative emotions towards fiction, or at least of some cases of negative emotions towards fiction. In this case, negative emotions are accompanied by negative evaluations of their objects (in virtue of Gaut's cognitive account of emotion). But, atypically for what they are, they are not accompanied by displeasure or are even felt with pleasure. This, Gaut concludes, dissolves the paradox of negative emotions.

One weakness of Gaut's analysis is that, as Gaut himself acknowledges, his argument, at most, only shows the *a priori* possibility that spectators of negatively emotional art experience negative emotions with contra-standard hedonic charges. But this is only sufficient to dissolve a very narrow version of the paradox of negative emotions. Not only does it not explain "why any particular individual enjoys feeling fear [...] or why some horror films are enjoyable and others not"[120]—something which Gaut programmatically leaves outside of his view's remit as a task that is better left to the psychological sciences; it does not even show *whether* the relevant *a priori* possibility is actualized—ever or,

[119] By and large, Gaut's appeal to transitivity here appears warranted, even if 'typically' really is a vague term if there is one.
[120] Gaut [1993], 344.

a fortiori, as often as spectators choose to attend to negatively emotional art. This is the puzzle posed by the paradox of negatively emotional art. It is a puzzle that arises from the evidence that spectators choose negatively emotional art, and it asks to account for such evidence.

In answer to this puzzle, Gaut does not provide any reason to suppose that enjoyment of pleasurable negative emotions is what in fact rewards or motivates spectators to engage in the relevant artistic experiences. No instances of the phenomenon are discussed in sufficient detail, be they either taken from art or from real life. The examples Gaut sketches are, for instance, that of admirers of John Waters' disgusting movie *Pink Flamingos* and that of the mountaineering enthusiast whose idea of a fun time involves putting herself in dangerous situations. The "most straightfoward explanation" of these examples, Gaut points out, is "that sometimes people *enjoy* being scared".[121] Perhaps that is true, but it is by no means the only explanation available. And showing that it is an explanation that is coherent with certain features of our most warranted conceptual landscape is an important and necessary result, but it is clearly not enough to show that it is the correct explanation.

There are many questions that Gaut should, but does not, answer in order to dissolve the paradox. Do people actually experience negative emotions as pleasurable in relevant artistic contexts? Why do such experiences occur in such artistic contexts? In other words, what is it with art that makes audiences atypical in the combination of emotional evaluation and hedonic charge? Are such experiences typically accessible to art audiences, or are they the prerogative of atypical, or, so to speak, abnormal subjects?[122]

[121] Gaut [1993], 337.
[122] Cf. Davies [2013] for a formal definition of the paradox of negative emotions as arising from the non-

To answer all of these questions, *a priori* investigations do not suffice; empirical evidence is also needed. In fact, even Gaut accepts that his own *a priori* argument appeals to empirical evidence of the sort that experimental psychologists are best placed to provide. For instance, Gaut's embracing a cognitive account of emotion is motivated by the empirical evidence that he cites concerning the unreliability of physiological methods as guides to the differentiation of one emotion from another. My own opinion is that the exchange between the philosophical and "empirical" investigations should go further than Gaut advocates. It is impossible for a philosopher to answer the puzzle of negatively emotional art with any satisfaction by the mere use of *a priori* strategies.

I find it worth clarifying here that the way that I have so far been reading Gaut is as a revisionary theorist.[123] A revisionary theorist claims that, atypically, negative emotions in art are felt as pleasant, rather than as unpleasant. Put in this way, this claim leaves open the question of whether it concerns *total* or *overall* pleasantness/unpleasantness. In other words, is the pleasure that one (supposedly) feels at the harrowing story told in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* a pleasure that is mixed or unmixed with pain? If unmixed, then one's experience is totally pleasant; by contrast, it is only overall pleasurable if pain enters into the mixture. Gaut cites the case of the mountaneering enthusiast, who enjoys "feeling the thrill of fear" while she "appreciates many aspects of the experience, and her fear is an inextricable part of the composite whole which she enjoys."[124] Characterized as Gaut does here, the mountaneer's pleasure is perfectly compatible with a certain amount of pain. In fact, fear, as well as

morbidity of the artistic experiences.

[123] On this I am in line with what I take to be the general consensus on how to read Gaut's proposal; cf. for instance Levinson [2006].

[124] Gaut [1993], 337.

other negative emotions, has a component (in fear, one can simplistically refer to it as 'the rush of adrenalin') that it is not absurd to call 'pleasurable'. Other negative emotions, which Gaut also mentions (e.g. sadness, anger etc.) have components that are in relevant respects similar to fear's rush of adrenalin. However, the typical experience of fear is one of *overall unpleasantness*.

However, revisionary accounts are often understood as characterizing the audience's experience in a stronger way than simply one of overall pleasureableness. In fact, if all that Gaut is saying is that instances of negative emotions felt in art are atypical in the sense of being overall pleasurable, then his view would be compatible with views that are more often seen as less radical, and are often classified as either conversionary or integrationist.[125] Here I have in mind views that some classify as "control" theories, such as Marcia Eaton [1982]'s and John Morreall [1985]'s views.[126] Roughly put, such views state that the reason we are drawn to works of negatively emotional art is that we know that the events eliciting negative emotions in us are only fictionally happening under our watch, so to speak. This reassures us that we are, as it were, at a safe distance from those events, and this in turn enables us to enjoy the emotional experience that we are afforded. The emotional experience described by such theories is, as in the reading of Gaut here at issue, overall pleasant.

I am not certain which of the two readings of Gaut is the correct one, so I will not push the exegetical issue further. What suffices for my purposes is to discuss the plausibility of both readings as accounts of negatively valuable art. I have already argued that the stronger, revisionary reading does not establish anything more than the (to an extent) *a priori* possibility of experiencing

[125] See Levinson [2006], 53, nn. 17 and 19.
[126] See Smuts [2009] and below for more on so-called "distance" or "control" theories.

pain-free negative emotions. Moreover, this account does not show what connections there are (supposed to be) between input and output of emotional responses to art. In other words, it does not explain how the characters and events portrayed by art manage to break the link between negative evaluation and unpleasantness, and hence result in negative emotions being experienced as pleasureable. Gaut's idea seems to be that what is represented is negatively evaluated, so that negative emotions are triggered, but that these emotions are nonetheless experienced as pleasant. What is the feature of the representation that makes this happen? Perhaps surprisingly, Gaut does not say explicitly, but I assume that the most likely candidate features are either the *fictionality* or *absence* of its content. In either case, it is however unclear why one should negatively evaluate fictional or absent characters and events, and yet feel pleasure at them because they are only fictional or absent after all. If in fact fictionality or absence enter into the hedonic character of the emotional experience, why do they not enter into the character of the evaluation? The Green Slime is only fictional (and definitely not present), the spectator in the Waltonian paradigmatic scenario might think; so, there is nothing to evaluate negatively in it.

But of course we do, in a sense, evaluate fictional or absent situations negatively, and we do feel some unpleasantness as a result. This is the default phenomenological account of our engagement with art. Unless sufficiently strong reasons to distrust this default account are offered, one ought to stick to it. As I have argued, Gaut's *a priori* argument does not do enough in this respect. Instead, control theories, as well as the weaker reading of Gaut's view, are compatible with the default phenomenological account. So I will turn to these views now.

13. So-called 'control theories' have an old history, going back at least as far as the eighteenth century, and continue to enjoy some popularity. As Smuts [2009] correctly argues, control theories are not however complete accounts of our attraction to negatively valuable art. Being at a sufficient distance from, or feeling in control of an event (represented or not),[127] might certainly mean judging it as less disvaluable or feeling less unpleasantness at it. But why should an art appreciator subject herself to disvalue or unpleasantness at all? Other claims must be complemented to the control thesis in order to satisfactorily address the paradox of negatively valuable art. A number of the views already surveyed in this chapter can do the job of complementing the control thesis. Here however I will discuss the view that can be read in Gaut's case of the mountaneering enthusiast. This view simply appeals to the presence of value or pleasure in many negatively emotional experiences. It is a view that Morreall [1985] has presented in its fullest form.

Morreall for instance says:

> it is natural that in fear there is the motivation to eliminate the danger, by fleeing, protecting ourselves, or attacking. Changes in the autonomic nervous system equip us for just such actions [...] although we may not be able to identify all these changes when we are in a state of fear, we can feel many of them directly, and we can certainly feel the overall excitement which they produce [...] this excitement [...] makes fear potentially enjoyable.[128]

Similar considerations apply to anger ("an emotion we have all taken pleasure

[127] Cf. Burke [1757/1958], 47.
[128] Morreall [1985], 96.

in"), sadness ("people sometimes intentionally put themselves into a melancholy mood, and even exaggerate their sad memories, just to savor the bittersweet thoughts that will arise"), and pity ("there is also a certain pleasure in feeling pity for and giving comfort to others").[129] Such pleasures of negative emotions, Morreall concludes, coupled with their reduced unpleasantness (which comes from control), motivate audiences to undergo the experience.

This view, call it 'the inherent-pleasure view', is simple and often true. It accords neatly with the phenomenology of many an artistic experience. Even though it is its strength, the theory's simplicity is also its limitation. The appreciation appropriate to many complex works of art, and in fact of those works which are often considered to be the very best, is not adequately (and completely) accounted for by the inherent-pleasure view. This is not to say that the view has nothing true to say about artistic masterpieces. Many, if not most of the greatest works of art that represent the negatively emotional afford the kind of appreciation described by the inherent-pleasure view. The best or most complex art is on a continuum with the worst art—it is just much better or more complex.

For instance, reading Alessandro Manzoni's *History of the Column of Infamy* simply as the harrowing story of two wronged men in seventeenth-century Milan may be enough to motivate someone to read the book. But how much more will one appreciate Manzoni's masterpiece if one grasps the truth of his lucid analysis of the superstition and bad will of the citizens of Milan, and of the enduring lesson about humanity that he thus imparts the reader! Appreciating Manzoni's masterpiece deeply does not simply bring greater physiological

[129] Morreall [1985], 98.

pleasures of indignation and compassion, arising from greater emotional involvement. It brings greater pleasures of *understanding*.

Nonetheless, however convincing (at least as a partial account) the inherent-pleasure view may be for negatively emotional art in general, the case of disgust sits less well with it. Disgust is ill-suited as a provider of pleasurable thrills comparable to those afforded by fear or anger. Moreover, disgust is also different from low-arousal emotions like sadness. Sadness can, so to speak, give the mind some needed rest from the labours of desire. By contrast, disgust needs to keep the emoter alert to the incumbent danger of contamination. On the other hand, not much effort is usually needed to avoid this danger: most of the time, keeping one's distance suffices. Disgust is therefore a bit like anxiety: mildly unpleasant, it keeps one on edge but does not promise much joy. The prospect of avoidance or cleansing only promises to lower one's state of alert to normal levels. But the disgusting remains everywhere around us and we can never feel completely over the danger of getting in contact with it.[130]

14. This picture is consonant with Moses Mendelssohn's claim that, in disgust, "the soul does not recognize any obvious admixture of pleasure".[131] The inherent-pleasure view is for this reason hardly applicable to disgusting art. However, less physiological and more cognitive emotional pleasures of the kind that Manzoni's *History* might afford a discerning reader merit a separate discussion. In fact, Carolyn Korsmeyer [2011] has recently appealed to disgust's

[130] As some have argued, there is sometimes a fascination with disgusting things; see Miller [1998] and Carroll [1990]. However, such fascination is typically not, I suggest, grounded in physiological features of the emotion of disgust, but in more highly cognitive mechanisms. In various parts of this chapter, and this thesis more generally, I discuss ways in which such cognitively-grounded fascination works.

[131] Mendelssohn [1760], cit. in Menninghaus [2003], 36. This was in fact a common view in the circle of German eighteenth-century theorists who endorsed the banning of disgust from art. In his "Reflections on Anthropology", Kant for instance claimed that: "Disgust is in itself and without recompense unpleasant", cit. in Menninghaus [2003], 407. Cf. Chapter 1.

meanings in an account of the seemingly paradoxical attraction of disgusting art. (Nussbaum's aforementioned understanding of katharsis also appealed to meanings in a manner that is not altogether different.) Korsmeyer builds her account on a critique of certain eighteenth-century views on the disgusting in art. These views were advanced above all by German-speaking aesthetic theorists: most prominently by Johann Adolf Schlegel, Moses Mendelssohn, Kant and, in certain respects, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. In essence, these eighteenth-century authors reacted to the paradox of negative emotions for disgust by denying that art appreciators are actually motivated to attend to disgusting art, or, if they are, then they ought not to be. I have already presented an outline of these views in Chapter 1. In the next chapter, I will recapitulate what I said there, add further details, and, more importantly, engage fully with the merits of their views, as well as with those of Korsmeyer's account.

6. Why Disgusting Art

1. According to the received eighteenth-century view, art should avoid, or at least be very wary of representing the disgusting. Carolyn Korsmeyer [2011] has recently argued against such a negative view, and supported instead a much more positive outlook on the value of disgusting art. This chapter will look closely at her reasons for disagreement with the eighteenth-century view. Doing this will give me a chance to present Korsmeyer's view as well as discuss the pros and cons of both the eighteenth-century view (which I have presented and preliminarly discussed in Chapter 1) and hers. What will emerge is further details of my own theoretical position. In particular, I will advance what I consider to be the most appropriate account of the value of much of the best disgusting art, with respect to the solution of the paradox of negatively valuable art. My account will be integrationist and of the same general kind as Korsmeyer's, and, in fact, not much different from general eighteenth-century accounts of aesthetic value either. It will however diverge from these in its specific account of *disgusting* art. Nonetheless, I will also argue that disgust is less artistically and aesthetically apt than other emotions, including negative ones like fear, sadness and anger. In a sense, I aim to partially vindicate the pessimism about disgusting art expressed by the German-speaking eighteenth-century authors earlier mentioned. However, my pessimism will not go so far as to deny all value to disgusting art. Moreover, my reasons for pessimism will

be to some extent different from those advanced in the eighteenth century.

2. As already pointed out in Chapter 1, the eighteenth-century banning of disgusting art was motivated in two main ways. Firstly, there is no pleasantness in the physiological feeling of disgust (see above; Korsmeyer does not mention this charge). Secondly, imitation is transparent with respect to disgust, and its unpleasantness is not therefore significantly mitigated by the non-existence or absence of its cause. A third charge against disgusting art that comes out explicitly in some authors, most notably Mendelssohn, is the following. Disgust is an emotion of the lower senses (i.e. smell, taste, touch), but the lower senses cannot afford the level of artistic pleasure that can instead be afforded by the higher senses (i.e. sight, vision). And, anyway, the lower senses are excluded from much of the fine arts from the start (only touch, and only to an extent, may be seen as involved in some art forms, for instance in sculpture).

In addition to these three, Korsmeyer attributes to eighteenth-century authors two additional charges against disgusting art. The first is that disgust elicitors are things that are too vile for artistic consideration or contemplation. Secondly, the disgusting does not actually disgust once it is made compatible with aesthetic delight.[1]

3. Korsmeyer does not mention the first of the eighteenth-century authors' reasons for the banning of disgust from art. However, one can use something she says in a different, but related context to at least understand the relevance of the first eighteenth-century charge for her views. In an attempt to dissolve on general grounds the paradox of negative emotions, Korsmeyer commits herself

[1] More needs to be said to clarify this second charge against disgusting art. Let me postpone the needed clarifications to later.

to a view of pleasure as *absorption*. The paradox of negative emotions, she argues, is built on a dichotomy between pleasure and pain, according to which pleasure is the opposite of pain, so whatever is unpleasant cannot at the same time be pleasurable. As Korsmeyer puts it,

> we encounter a real paradox only if the "painful" content of art is in principle incompatible with the aesthetic "pleasure" it occasions.[2]

But, Korsmeyer maintains, pleasure is not the opposite of pain. In fact, it is something rather different from pain (i.e. something that does not belong to the same category of things as pain). Or, rather, pleasure is not one single thing but takes many different forms. In general, and unlike pain, it is best characterized not as a sensation, but as a form of attention, or of absorption in an activity. So, something, an emotion for instance, can be painful yet pleasurable for one, insofar as it *absorbs* one's attention.

Given her view of pleasure as absorption, Korsmeyer might agree with the eighteenth-century claim that disgust is purely unpleasant physiologically, but still maintain that the absence of emotional physiological pleasure does not entail absence of aesthetic pleasure. If aesthetic pleasure is absorption in something that is capable of attracting aesthetic interest, then disgust can afford it in virtue of the meanings that accompany disgust, or, in Korsmeyer's terms, the meanings that disgust "registers".[3] In other words, the first eighteenth-century charge against disgusting art would not seem to bear much relevance to Korsmeyer's theoretical position (at least in her intentions).

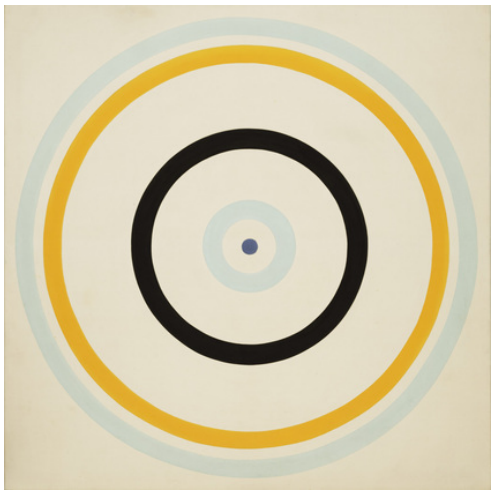
However, various problems plague Korsmeyer's analysis. First, as much as

[2] Korsmeyer [2011], 117.
[3] Cf. for instance Korsmeyer [2011], 137.

there are senses of 'pleasure' in which pleasure is not merely physiological or a single type of thing, there are also senses of 'pain' that work analogously (e.g. *emotional* pain). Conversely, there are senses of 'pleasure' in which pleasure is very much like the *sensation* of pain (e.g. sexual orgasm).[4] So pain and pleasure are not as asymmetric as Korsmeyer suggests. Secondly, opposites need not be incompatible in the way that Korsmeyer suggests. One can attribute both positive and negative value to, say, the consequences of a car accident that one had (because, say, one learnt one ought not to speed-drive, but had one's car insurance cost double). As suggested with respect to control theories, in fact, several negative emotions are a mixture of pleasure and pain, where the pleasure involved is in effect physiological pleasure. Thirdly, the paradox of negative emotions is just an instance of a more general paradox of negative *value*. And, whatever one thinks about pleasure and pain, one will probably endorse the view that negative and positive value are opposites. Finally, in this context, 'absorption' is a misleading substitute for 'pleasure'. It both captures experiences which are not artistically or aesthetically pleasurable (e.g. the attention of a skilled worker, a surgeon for example, on his work) and (at least *prima facie*) fails to capture experiences that it should capture (e.g. fleeting, yet pleasing aesthetic experiences such as Kenneth Noland's *Turnsole* [1961]).[5]

[4] Cf. also Contesi [2012]. Korsmeyer in fact appears to accept this at one point, when, parenthetically, she says of Anthony Kenny [1963/2003] that "he correctly observes that some sensations arouse pleasure" (Korsmeyer [2011], 118).

[5] I discovered Noland's work through David Davies' informative discussion of "fast art" in his British Society of Aesthetics 2013 Conference talk entitled "Neo-Goodmanian Aesthetics and the Problem of 'Fast Art"'.



47. Kenneth Noland, *Turnsole*, 1961

4. Korsmeyer's formal solution of the paradox,[6] as well as her alternative view of aesthetic pleasure as aesthetic absorption, have flaws. Two of her central insights in them are however correct. The first is that pain and pleasure, whether understood as sensations or as something cognitively richer, can co-exist within the same experience. Nonetheless, it is far from obvious that this is sufficient to explain away the paradox of negative emotions or negatively valuable art—even if only formally. The paradox does not arise from the apparent impossibility of pain/pleasure co-existence, but from the apparent incongruence between our preferences in real life and in art. Lots of real-life experiences are a mixture of pain and pleasure. The paradox of negatively valuable art is not concerned with this but with the specificity of artistic or aesthetic experience.

Properly understood, the paradox of negatively valuable art works as a prod to look for differences between the real-life and art contexts that might explain the difference in our preferences. As I see it, the problem, at least as

[6] It is perhaps worth stressing that Korsmeyer does not see her formal refutation of the paradox as sufficient to answer the "perplexing question of why many people are attracted to painful works of art, especially to works that arouse disgust" (Korsmeyer [2011], 119).

far as disgust is concerned, coalesces around the *amount*, in the experiential mixture, of pleasure and pain, or more generally of value and disvalue. For some of the reasons that I have offered in this chapter so far, it is a hard-to-deny common-sensical view that in the relevant artistic, as well as real-life, contexts, completely disvaluable or completely valuable experiences are hard to come by—and are certainly not the norm. In particular, the experiences that we generally have with negatively valuable art are more often a mixture of value and disvalue; the ones we pursue are those that afford us greater valuable rewards than disvalue.

For this reason, I am more concerned than Korsmeyer is (likely to be) by disgust's unmixed unpleasantness. Because of it, the threshold of pleasure/disvalue that a work has to overcome in the case of disgust is, *ceteris paribus*, higher than in the case of other negative emotions. Moreover, because of disgust's ideational character and its unconsciousness of purpose, the representational or fictional nature of disgusting artworks has less of a moderating effect on the frequency and intensity of the disgust response appropriate to those works (because it makes disgust's triggering and persistence less avoidable, in the ways described in Chapter 3).[7]

Nonetheless, the absence of significant physiological pleasure in disgust does not entail a complete absence of value in disgusting art. Firstly, as I have already shown, there can be artistic value of a co-existentialist kind. Moreover, the presence of pain, especially if moderated, is perfectly compatible with even aesthetic value. One of the points of agreement with Korsmeyer is that disgust

[7] As pointed out in Chapter 3, some moderating effect is nonetheless possible, given disgust's ideational character. All other things being equal, in fact, this is more so than in a sensory model of disgust elicitation like Korsmeyer's.

experiences come in varying degrees of intensity (just like experiences of fear, anger etc.).[8] Disgust need not be overwhelming and is sometimes very mild. This is compatible with unmixed unpleasantness: disgust can typically afford no physiological pleasure and yet be unpleasant to different degrees in different circumstances. Some low degree of unpleasantness can definitely be made compatible with aesthetic value. As I have pointed out, pleasure and pain are not incompatible (even if they are opposites). As a matter of fact, some (physiological) unpleasantness does sometimes increase the appeal or (broadly speaking) pleasure of an experience. This was a commonly-made point in the eighteenth century, e.g. by the Abbé Du Bos, by Burke, and indeed by Hume. As will become (even) clearer in what follows, this is a crucial point when it comes to the solution of the paradox of negatively valuable art in the case of disgust (as well as in the account of the value of disgusting art more generally). Nonetheless, disgust's unmixed unpleasantness remains an important aspect of the experience afforded by disgusting art, and one that poses important limits to the artistic *potential* of the emotion.

5. Korsmeyer's second correct insight concerns the general kind of account which can solve the paradox of negatively valuable art for much of the best disgusting art. Ideas or "meanings" are indeed key to aesthetic value in the disgusting art case (as well as in general). In fact, this is an insight which can already be seen, albeit perhaps only *in nuce*, in the views on aesthetics endorsed by some of the very eighteenth-century theorists who worked at the beginning of aesthetics as an automonous discipline—some in fact of those who were so sceptical of disgusting art's value. This insight was in fact mostly lost

[8] Cf. e.g. Korsmeyer [2011], 97.

for a long while on many an aesthetic theorist after (and to some extent perhaps beginning with) Kant, until only too recently. Korsmeyer is one of the most prominent authors to revive it. The view of aesthetic value at hand is well captured by a passage that Korsmeyer quotes from Paul Guyer [2005]'s description of Alexander Baumgarten's thought: "The particular feature of sensory perception that is exploited for the unique pleasure of aesthetic experience ... is its *richness*, the possibility of conveying a lot of information through a single pregnant image".[9]

Perhaps Korsmeyer does not fully appreciate the extent of the similarity between her general view and the one that was common in the eighteenth century (at least in German-speaking circles). Although she quotes from Guyer's report of Baumgarten's views, she also emphasizes her scepticism about the theoretical benefits of the notion of *pleasure* in this context. However, as I have shown earlier, there is less to worry about with respect to that notion than she suggests. Besides their (important) differences when it comes to disgusting art, Korsmeyer and many of the eighteenth-century authors at issue are essentially on the same page when it comes to their account of aesthetic value and their favoured general solution of the paradox of negatively valuable art. And I think this account and solution are of the right kind. However, not any meaning will afford positive aesthetic value when presented through an(y) aesthetic vehicle. This is especially true if the subject of a work (also) affords an important amount of dis-pleasure or -value. Let us look at what meanings Korsmeyer deems important in disgusting art.

The heart has a central place in Korsmeyer's account; an entire chapter

[9] As cit. in Korsmeyer [2011], 8; Guyer's emphasis. I take Korsmeyer in this context to be extending Guyer's use of the word 'image' to include emotions or feelings.

of her book is devoted to it. To the human heart, she holds, have accrued a host of meanings over the centuries. Amongst these are love, longing, loyalty, honesty, essence, privateness, deeply-held knowledge, and, perhaps most importantly, life. Besides these symbolic meanings, Korsmeyer continues, the human heart is (literally) disgusting. Disgust accompanies the aforementioned symbolic meanings of the human heart and envelops them with a distinctive feeling. Although not the only one, the symbolic meaning that is most distinctive of disgust in this sense is, Korsmeyer suggests, *human mortality*. This is especially poignant in the case of the human heart. If the heart is out of the body or exposed, death is probably near. Taking the heart out of one's body quite literally means taking one's life.

But how strong is the connection between human mortality and disgust meant to be? The key point in Korsmeyer's view is, once more, that disgust can be part of aesthetic appreciation, its unpleasantness notwithstanding. This is so insofar as disgust offers cognitive riches that command an appreciator's interest and attention. This is not, however, simply to say that cognitive rewards compensate for the emotion's unpleasantness. Korsmeyer is in fact critical of cognitivist solutions *à la* Carroll.[10] On her view, the appreciator can, in her words, "savour" disgust itself in virtue of the ideas that the emotion embodies. She argues, in fact, that "emotions have meaning—have semantic content—that

[10] Her criticisms to Carroll are of two kinds. One is that cognitive pleasures *à la* Carroll can be *too* cognitive. Instead, the artistic pleasures of the best disgusting art are often to be found at the lower cognitive level of non-propositional (or even non-conceptual) imagination or intuition. Roughly put, Korsmeyer's idea is that, whilst *saying that*—for instance—humans are inevitably mortal may be trivial, having a *bodily appreciation* of the idea of human mortality is more aesthetically rewarding. The bodily appreciation in question can hardly be non-conceptual however, given what it concerns (i.e. the *idea* of human mortality). It can however be non-propositional. Secondly, she suggests that cognitive accounts like Carroll's postulate a "rivalry between pleasure in learning and pain in disgust", which locates "enjoyment only in the learning component of the experience" (Korsmeyer [2011], 125). This latter criticism is reminiscent of a criticism often raised against Carroll's view, a version of which I myself have endorsed in Chapter 5.

is delivered by the bodily changes that define them".[11] In a jargon that is more familiar to contemporary philosophical discussions of emotions, this "semantic content", or the ideas or meanings that an emotion can embody, is the *cognitive* content, or cognitive component of an emotion.

Of the semantic contents that disgust can embody, "meanings of human mortality" are, according to Korsmeyer, most distinctive of disgust and especially apt to aesthetic appreciation. Disgust, she claims, "means decay, putrefaction, disintegration: death".[12] But is not *fear* the most appropriate emotion to associate with death? To this Korsmeyer responds that the fearsome and the disgusting both represent threats, but in different ways. Unlike scary objects,

> objects that disgust pose long-term threats that are all the worse for being absolutely inexorable. Disgust is more of a response to the transition between life and death...[13]

and,

> Disgust recognizes the communion of death with the process of disintegration, along with the subsequent devolution to life-forms where discrete individual identity is insignificant, giving way to swarms, nests, hives, infestations. [...] Reflection on the emotion leads to the nasty realization that the time will come when our own integrity will suffer the same indignities, that the exalted human will become one

[11] Korsmeyer [2011], 28. Here Korsmeyer approvingly describes an aspect of the theory advanced in Jesse Prinz [2004]. She endorses this aspect of Prinz's theory more explicitly at p. 30: "The manner in which Prinz articulates appraisals, in which it is the bodily feeling itself that possesses semantic content, indicates an especially useful way to understand aesthetic apprehensions involving disgust." Korsmeyer's general view of emotion is by her own admission syncretistic in its attempt to capture what is good in each of the major competing theories of emotion. It would be misleading to extend her endorsement of Prinz's theory beyond the few remarks quoted.

[12] Korsmeyer [2011], 122.

[13] Korsmeyer [2011], 122.

with the worm.[14]

Suggestive as it is, however, Korsmeyer's view of disgust as "a response to the transition between life and death" is problematic.[15] As I have shown in Chapter 2, the cognitive content of disgust does not contain meanings of human mortality or anything like them. There is no formal object of disgust, in the sense of a single property that the emotion ascribes to its elicitors and that emoters can be aware of. This is its unconsciousness of purpose. One thing that this means is that, typically, the (distal) reasons behind our disgust reactions are either buried in our hard-wired preparedness set or in our past history of experiences (evaluative conditioning), or concern a history of contact with other disgust elicitors (law of contamination).[16] There is no other way to characterize the formal object of disgust, at least insofar as it is relevant to aesthetic appreciation, except as in terms of the very property of *disgustingness*.

Consequently, first, Korsmeyer's view of the aesthetic value of disgusting art in terms of meanings of human mortality is implausible. Secondly, the cognitive content of disgust is even less generous than this. The meanings that are in disgust's cognitive content and that the emotion can, in Korsmeyer's sense, embody for aesthetic benefits, are limited to those accompanying the property of *disgustingness*. Among these meanings are the undesirability of

[14] Korsmeyer [2011], 123.

[15] The view is explicitly inspired by some remarks made by Aurel Kolnai [1929/2004]. Cf. Chapter 2 for more on Kolnai's and other similar views.

[16] Our *proximate* reasons for disgust are instead much more accessible to our consciousness. For instance, being disgusted by mucus is typically dependent on believing or imagining that what we are disgusted by is actually mucus (cf. Rozin and Fallon [1987] and Contesi [forthcoming]). However, these proximate reasons are not relevant to my purposes here, as they are neither part of an emotion's formal object, nor can they be said on their own to be part of the meanings that an emotion embodies. Fear of a tiger approaching, for instance, may embody ideas that concern the way in which the tiger moves its steps on the ground, but only insofar as these steps are threatening. The tiger's stepping towards me in the way that it does is not necessarily (or in all possible worlds) connected to fear, but only insofar as fear is the emotion that responds to immediate threats.

coming into contact with a disgust elicitor or its power to make other things disgusting through contact, or even perhaps the inchoate idea of an unspecified threat.[17] All other meanings are generally either not part of disgust's cognitive component or buried deep outside of any potential awareness on the part of the emoter/appreciator.

What this suggests is that the meanings of disgusting art are less cognitively rich than those of emotions like fear, anger or sadness. These latter emotions in fact represent ideas connected to both the relevant emotional responses (e.g. fearsomeness) and non-circular specifications of their formal objects (e.g. dangerousness). Disgust can only represent the former class of ideas. Moreover, the ideas connected to disgustingness are generally less culturally significant than those associated with such recurrent artistic themes as danger or loss. Both considerations contribute to motivating a degree of pessimism about the aesthetic potentials of disgusting art. Disgust's unmixed unpleasantness also contributes to such pessimism, as well as other considerations which I will advance in what follows.

As I suggested in Chapter 2, in some occasional cases it may look as though there are cognitions that are obviously, or even consciously associated with one's disgust. For instance, I sometimes look at the contents of a rubbish bin

[17] As far as the latter is concerned, the inchoateness is also a consequence of the way disgust works (and in particular of its unconsciousness of purpose). Other emotions involve ideas of threat, for instance fear or anger, but in a richer and more distinct sense. In this respect, it is perhaps worth repeating here what Kolnai illuminatingly says with respect to the distinction between disgust and fear: "disgust has often been apprehended as a mere variant of fear—a conception whereby we should somehow also experience fear of what is disgusting, a fear which is however characterized by a peculiar additional quality. Many disgusting objects are, as is well-known, harmful or dangerous, *yet without displaying directly that open gesture of threat* which belongs to what is fearful in the narrowest sense, such as those forces of nature, living beings, and events by which human beings can be seized and crushed. [...] But this conception is not tenable, for there is a well-known mode of fear or anxiety that pertains to concealed and nebulous dangers without having anything to do with disgust at all. In order to produce disgust, elements are required *which are totally different from those which produce insidious threats, and the latter may be entirely absent in the presence of disgusting objects*" (Kolnai [1929/2004], 46–7; emphases mine).

and have the clear impression that my disgust at the scene is motivated by a desire to avoid catching a disease. I have heard others who instead would associate their disgust at the same scene with the idea of other people having previously touched the stuff inside the bin. No doubt other cognitions can become associated with disgust at particular elicitors—even perhaps human mortality. Such cognitions can be richer and more aesthetically powerful than those revolving around the property of *disgustigness* (e.g. a vague threat of contamination), for example in virtue of a specific reference to diseases and the assumption of an underlying knowledge of some kind of a germ theory. Where present, these richer cognitions would either coincide with some of the reasons causally involved in acquiring disgust towards a certain elicitor or, more probably, be produced as *post-hoc* rationalizations.

Either way, even if such cognitions do in some cases integrate with the emotion of disgust so much that they become part of its cognitive component, this can only be of limited aesthetic significance. Where it occurred, such integration would in fact be significantly idiosyncratic in its mechanisms. Contrary to the typical cognitive connection between, for instance, fear and danger, a connection between disgust and human mortality would be significantly less systematic and more individual-relative. As already pointed out, the mechanisms of disgust acquisition are importantly different from those of fear acquisition.

This has relevance to disgust's relative potential for aesthetic value because of (much of) art's aim to universality, or near-universality. One of the marks of great art is its capacity to be universal, or at least to seriously aim to be universal. One of the differences between the artistic status of any proud mother's child's school drawing and the *Mona Lisa* is that the former may only be enjoyed and praised by a limited number of people, whilst the latter

has a real chance of affording a valuable aesthetic experience to a vast number of people, and maybe even speak to everyone. In this respect, disgust is in a much worse position as a contributor to aesthetic value than such emotions as fear.

This is neither to deny any aesthetic potential to disgust, nor to suggest that no work of disgusting art can belong in the very echelon class of art masterpieces. Instead, this simply suggests that truly great disgusting art is relatively difficult to come by and to produce. Moreover, the failure of Korsmeyer's particular account in terms of meanings of human mortality ought not push anyone to distrust her insight concerning the general account of aesthetic value often appropriate to the best disgusting art. This latter account correctly appeals to disgust's semantic content to ensure a sufficiently close connection between emotion and cognition. Only in this way the artistic experience can have the virtues of profundity, unity and necessity that a competent art appreciator should seek. The presence of these virtues will also contribute to account for the appreciator's interest in experiences, the real-life counterpart of which she would be more often averse to having.

Appeal to semantic content ensures *profundity* because it grounds aesthetic appreciation in more cognitively rich phenomena than mere sensuous fascination (or "retinal pleasures" to say it with Marcel Duchamp).[18] *Unity* and *necessity* are ensured by the integrated nature of the basic affective programme of disgust (cognitive content-cum-phenomenology). What the relevant cognitive interest should not be is just some ideas accruing to something which is also, incidentally, disgusting. This makes such an account preferable to already-

[18] See Cabanne [2009], 43 and *passim*.

criticized cognitivist solutions to the paradox of negatively valuable art, which postulate cognitive rewards that are too disconnected from the negatively valuable experiences.

6. I am less sympathetic to the second of the eighteenth-century charges to disgusting art.[19] It is not only, or not so much, that the "lower senses" are not as artistically inept as many in the eighteenth century believed. (Nor is a hierarchy of the senses especially helpful in theorizing about these or other matters.) Certainly, the senses of smell, taste and touch afford important degrees of sophistication to the discerning experiencer.[20] But it is again disgust's ideational character that makes the eighteenth-century charge especially misguided. Disgust is not an emotion of one particular sense or another. As argued in Chapter 2, it is primarily ideational, not sensory considerations, that 'make' something disgusting.

Taste and touch however involve a more proximate access to things than sight and hearing. And, proximity-wise, smell is in a sense in-between the two categories of senses (i.e. sight-and-hearing, and taste-and-touch). Since disgust is sensitive to the proximity between elicitor and emoter, smell, taste and touch will, typically and *ceteris paribus*, afford stronger, more intense disgust than sight or hearing. Moreover, smell is especially intrusive, for the sensory access that it enables is less easily obstructed than in the case of the other sensory modalities (e.g. through removing one's skin from something, or closing one's eyes or ears, or spitting). For these reasons, the "lower senses" generally afford stronger disgust experiences than sight or hearing. However,

[19] Mendelssohn [1760] is a target here; Lessing [1766/1962] was instead more subtle on the issue, in that he held that one could be disgusted by the sight of something, as well as by its smell, taste and touch. Cf. Chapter 1.

[20] Cf. Korsmeyer [1999].

this generalization can only be misleadingly used as evidence for one or more senses being *primary*, or more *proper* senses of disgust, than others—as many have done from the eighteenth century onwards.[21] The senses may well have a greater role in determining the intensity of a disgust experience than that of, e.g., an experience of fear. But, just like fear, disgust is primarily ideational. So there are no proper senses of disgust *tout court*.

Moreover, the changes in artistic practices and sensitivities since the eighteenth century mean that a larger share of the art produced and appreciated today involves sensory experiences that are different from the visual or auditory. Installations, performances, landscape and mixed-media art often involve the "lower senses" more often than classical painting or music does.

As a consequence, I think that Korsmeyer's take on this second of the eighteenth-century charges against disgusting art is basically sensible, although still too dependent on eighteenth-century classifications. She suggests in fact that "art usually has its own mitigation [...] because its *primary* sensory triggers are rarely present in art at all".[22] Although coherent with her sensory understanding of disgust elicitation, Korsmeyer's reference to "primary" senses of disgust here is misplaced. Nonetheless, Korsmeyer is correct in saying that, from the point of view of disgusting art's value, the focus of a lot of art on the "higher senses" of sight and hearing is an advantage. Keeping disgust's unpleasantness low, typically and *ceteris paribus*, facilitates compatibility of disgust experiences and artistic value.

However, there may be value even in disgusting art that directly involves the "lower senses". A large proportion of such artworks will not be meant to

[21] Cf. Kolnai [1929/2004], Miller [1998], Korsmeyer [2011] etc.
[22] Korsmeyer [2011], 57; her emphasis.

afford aesthetic value more narrowly construed. Instead, a lot of the relevant art will call for some (extrinsic) cognitive interest of one kind or another: social, political or ethical, meta-artistic etc. Again, art and artistic value have to be understood more broadly than many in the eighteenth century did.

7. I have already discussed (in Chapter 3) the transparency of disgust, i.e. the third of the eighteenth-century charges to disgusting art. Korsmeyer agrees with eighteenth-century authors such as Mendelssohn and Kant that disgust is transparent to representation. However, to repeat, transparency is for her not a sufficient reason to ban disgust from art. This is so for three main reasons: (1) disgust is not always a violent emotion but comes in degrees, (2) the "primary" senses of disgust are rarely stimulated by art, and (3) the unpleasant feeling of disgust is not incompatible with pleasurable absorption in its "meanings". As I have already pointed out, I agree with (1) and (3), as well as with a qualified version of (2).

To recapitulate what I argued in Chapter 3, I disagree with Korsmeyer and her eighteenth-century sources that either representation or fiction are transparent with respect to disgust. However, representations do elicit disgust especially easily and passively when compared to other emotions. This is not because of a peculiar sensory character possessed by disgust, but in virtue of its object-centricity. As a consequence of this, I agree with Korsmeyer that (1)–(3) do a lot of theoretical work in justifying the attribution of value, especially aesthetic value, to disgusting art.

To be sure, disgust is *to some extent* malleable. It is not so much that a number of its elicitors are cross-culturally and -individually variable. This has not much relevance as far as the present investigation into the appreciation of disgusting art is concerned (although it certainly does have consequences on

differences in appreciation across cultures and individuals).[23] The best available evidence suggests that there is broad cross-cultural and -individual convergence on a core set of disgust elicitors. I have made it a point throughout this thesis to focus on items inside this set.[24] Rather, the relevant malleability of disgust concerns the possibility to modify our disgust sensitivity to certain elicitors and in certain contexts. Robert Rawdon Wilson [2002] makes this point by drawing on intriguing examples taken from both art and real life. He suggests that it is in our imaginative capabilities to modify our initial reactions of disgust to certain things. Wilson's analysis is not philosophical and he does not trace clear limits to this imaginative power of ours. But he is right about the principle.

Disgust is ideational in nature, and its relative ease and passivity of elicitation are in many cases best characterized as a relative ease in recognizing or imagining a disgust elicitor, as well as a relative difficulty in *not* recognizing or imagining it.[25] With some extra effort, usually helped by time and by the force of habit, we can stop being disgusted by certain images or descriptions of things, or even by those things altogether. Categories of people whose experiences can testify to this power of our mind are: horror-film aficionados, cleaning, hospital, and morgue workers, and perhaps also OCD (ex-)patients who have successfully undergone exposure-and-response-prevention cognitive behavioural therapy. This power of our cognitive and imaginative faculties, I suspect, goes at least some way towards explaining the much greater tolerance that we have towards representations of various disgusting things (in

[23] This is an eminently interesting issue, which certainly deserves more rigorous attention than it has received, but one which falls outside the philosophical, general remit of this thesis. For a study of the analogous phenomenon concerning the ugly, see for instance Eco [2011] and Nuttall [2006].
[24] Cf. Chapter 2.
[25] Cf. Chapter 3.

art, journalism etc.) today (at least in Western cultures), than our parents, grand-parents, or indeed eighteenth-century art appreciators had. For various reasons, the way we generally represent the world to ourselves has been changing a lot over time, and in particular in the past two centuries. Part and parcel of this change has likely been a change in the way we understand or imagine certain things.

Nonetheless, changes in our disgust sensitivities like the above take time to develop. Moreover, they have a somewhat limited scope: they are limited to certain kinds of representations and to certain kinds of things. By and large, disgust works in the same way as it worked two centuries ago. In fact, it serves the same functions in our (real, if not imagined) lives that it served two centuries ago (or five, or ten). In much more ancient times than these, evolution most likely favoured disgust as a human trait precisely for these functions. In fact, although I agree with Korsmeyer that disgust's ease and passivity of elicitation is not incompatible with artistic and aesthetic appreciation, I am much less optimistic than she is about disgust's potential in art. This peculiarity of disgust does pose a serious obstacle to art appreciation. As I will suggest later, the obstacle can certainly be overcome in some circumstances—in this I am more optimistic than many of the eighteenth-century authors discussed above—but it does make disgust a significantly more resilient material for art than other emotions are.[26]

8. In order to suggest some (more) reasons for the latter claim, I want to

[26] Although disgust is a more resilient material for artistic, and especially aesthetic value, it is also a very easy emotion to elicit (as I have suggested in the last few paragraphs). There is no theoretical tension here. Cf. for instance King [1981], discussed in Chapter 5, who holds both that the "gross-out" (i.e. the artistic effect enabled by disgusting material) is the lowest level in the value hierarchy of horror fictions, but that it is also "fairly easy to achieve [...] Even the worst horror movies sometimes achieve a moment or two of success on this level" (115–6).

offer some further considerations about Korsmeyer's (1)–(3). This time, my focus is on the comparison between disgust and other, traditionally considered more artistically apt, negative emotions. As should be obvious from the foregoing, my aim is certainly not to deny that disgust is compatible with art appreciation. Even the most sophisticated of eighteenth-century discussions, for instance those contained in Burke [1757/1958] or Lessing [1766/1962], argue against total incompatibility between disgust and art. Instead, it is perhaps more interesting to explore to what *extent* and in what *ways* the two are compatible.

(1) It is true that disgust comes in degrees, and it is a merit of Korsmeyer's study that it points this out explicitly. But many other (negative) emotions also come in degrees—fear, for instance. The differences between disgust and fear, however, remain. In fact, for some of the most artistically-apt negative emotions, it is often true of audiences that, as Hume famously said, the "more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle". But, as a rule, disgust does not do this to the same extent as other unpleasant emotions. This is mainly due to disgust's mixed unpleasantness. As a result, the best disgusting art often shows restraint on the artists' part in the amount of disgust that they try to elicit.

Some instances of comedic works, of horror and of what may be called 'provocative art' may look like exceptions to the rule in this sense. This is so insofar as the affective response that they elicit seems to work like a defence mechanism. The greater the 'threat' they represent, the greater is the defence that is required. The greater the defence required, the greater the amount of pleasurable energy that is released. Nonetheless, even in comedy and horror—if one looks at the very best works of the kind, say Rabelais's and Poe's—one

will find that they usually never exaggerate in the amount of disgustingness that they deploy.[27] By contrast, even the greatest of artists do not restrain themselves nearly as much in the amount of terror, indignation, or compassion that they set out to elicit.[28]

(2) Although I do not share Korsmeyer's understanding of the "senses of disgust", I certainly agree with her that the lesser relative frequency with which the "lower senses" are stimulated by art (than the "higher senses"), combined with their (on average) greater unpleasantness makes the disgusting less difficult to deploy in art than it otherwise would be. And yet, this is not an argument that can be used to disprove disgust's lesser potential in art when compared to other emotions. What it does is simply to show that the disgusting is often more tolerable than it might be.

(3) Although cognitive reward is certainly a redeeming feature of much disgusting art (as of negatively valuable art more generally), I am less optimistic than Korsmeyer is about the variety and potential of the "meanings" that can contribute to (much of the best) disgusting art's *aesthetic* value. As earlier argued, disgust's unconsciousness of purpose restricts such meanings to those associated with the very property of *disgustingness*. In this sense, disgust is generally speaking less aesthetically apt than such emotions as fear, anger and sadness (and than their variants: e.g. terror, indignation, despair etc.).

It must already be evident how my views on the value of disgusting art are in a sense more traditional than Korsmeyer's. In particular, I am more concerned than she is by the limits of disgust's aesthetic potential when compared

[27] Cf. also discussion of Poe's horror in Chapter 5.
[28] But cf. also later in this chapter for further considerations on the role of the disgusting in comedy, horror and provocative art.

to other negative emotions. In fact, some of my concerns are consonant with those expressed by the German-speaking eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists often mentioned. Furthermore, I advance and endorse further, converging concerns. At the same time, it is my contention that disgusting art can have great aesthetic value nonetheless. I will show how in a moment.

9. As I said, Korsmeyer mentions two additional charges against disgusting art, which she traces back to the eighteenth century. The first of these centres on the vileness of many disgust elicitors. Korsmeyer does not address this charge directly, but aims instead to defuse it by showing the ungroundedness of the banning of disgusting art that the charge is supposed to establish. This latter task is meant to be accomplished mainly by means of her account of the aesthetic value of disgusting art, in terms of disgust's "meanings".

It is difficult to give a clear formulation of the charge in question, or to trace it back to any particular proponent. Although the loose formulation of the charge that I have employed so far is far from unintelligible, it may nonetheless seem difficult to characterize as "vile" all disgust elicitors—even if one restricts oneself to the most common disgust elicitors. Firstly, disgust tends to relegate things to the category of the vile almost by definition. A disgusted person's central preoccupation is to avoid the object of her disgust. Because of the way that disgust works, the object of disgust tends to be avoided not only entirely and physically, but in one's words and thoughts, too. Thus, disgust's elicitors are all "vile", or "mean", in the sense that they are, or should, remain beneath one's attention. Secondly, it is difficult to see what kind of "vileness" may be common to things as diverse as faeces, blood, insects, amputated bodies etc.

Even though the point may be hard to express precisely, and although this may be due to an extent to their very disgustingness, it is difficult to deny that

most of us consider many disgust elicitors as, in some sense, vile, or unworthy of our sustained attention or consideration. To use Korsmeyer's terminology, the "meanings" associated with many disgust elicitors are often unworthy of (pleasurable) "absorption". More often than disgust, by contrast, several other emotions, including both basic and negative emotions, have elicitors that are, again in a sense that it is difficult to characterize precisely, rewarding of intellectual consideration—as well as aesthetic contemplation—for many of us.

However by themselves disgust elicitors may often be of rather poor interest in the sense indicated, one might object that the interest of which they are worthy can perhaps be much higher in certain *contexts*. To this purpose, it is interesting to discuss the eighteenth-century source with whom Korsmeyer associates the vileness charge, i.e. Edmund Burke [1757/1958].[29] As Korsmeyer reports it, disgusting objects "are, in Burke's words, merely odious and as such aesthetically discountable".[30] To this she adds that Burke "dismisses disgust [...] in one sentence"—this one:

> Things which are terrible are always great, but when things possess disagreeable qualities, or such as have indeed some degree of danger, but of a danger easily overcome, they are merely *odious*.[31]

As a matter of fact, however, Burke here is not making quite the point that Korsmeyer interprets him as making. In fact, he neither dismisses disgust in one sentence, nor does he take disgusting things to be *ipso facto* merely odious or aesthetically discountable. His point is different, as I have already

[29] In fact, to my knowledge, the German-speaking theorists I have often mentioned do not explicitly formulate this charge.
[30] Korsmeyer [2011], 47.
[31] Burke [1757/1958], cit. in Korsmeyer [2011], 45.

suggested in Chapter 1. In fact, Burke's point is formulated *as an exception* to the view that disgusting things (disgusting smells, in particular) are necessarily incompatible with aesthetic delight. Instead, Burke advocates a contextual view. If the disgusting is associated with "mean and contemptible ideas" or things, then it is merely odious and aesthetically unsuccessful. However, disgusting smells *can* be "sources of the sublime, *as genuine as any other*" if their unpleasantness is attenuated and they are "united with images of an allowed grandeur". And, in fact, Burke mentions two passages from Virgil in which this happens: one in which "the stench of the vapour in Albunea conspires so happily with the sacred horror and gloominess of that prophetic forest", and the other in which "the poisonous exhalation of Acheron is not forgot, nor does it at all disagree with the other images amongst which it is introduced".[32]

Burke's reasoning here bears an important resemblance with Lessing's exception, from the material that ought to be avoided in art, of what is not merely disgusting. In that context, Lessing mentions "the long nails protruding beyond the fingers" attributed to Sadness in Hesiod's *Shield of Heracles*. "[A]lthough long nails are scarcely less disgusting than a running nose", says Lessing, "long nails are also terrible, for they tear the flesh from the cheeks so that the blood streams to the ground".[33]

As I see it, there is a good deal of truth to Burke's and Lessing's contextual view. Even though in many cases vile, or unworthy of attention on their own, disgusting things become more interesting in certain contexts or when they play certain roles. Sometimes, this contextual change is accompanied by a change in artistic, and more interestingly, aesthetic effect from the unpleasant to the

[32] Burke [1757/1958], 85–6; my emphasis; cf. also Chapter 1.
[33] Lessing [1766/1962], 133; cf. Chapter 1.

pleasurable (especially if the unpleasantness of the disgust elicited is not very strong to begin with).

10. This contextual view and its connection to aesthetic value can be seen as an instance of a more general issue. This is the connection between disgust and aesthetic effects rooted in other emotions or responses. This connection can be further explored by considering the second of the two additional charges against disgusting art that Korsmeyer traces back to the eighteenth century. On this charge, the disgusting ceases to disgust as soon as it becomes a source of positive art appreciation. Instead, it "take[s] on a different affective quality altogether, becoming grotesque, ridiculous, tragic, but no longer actually disgusting".[34] Here, too, Korsmeyer gets her attributions wrong. None of the eighteenth-century authors that were concerned with disgusting art—at least to the best of my knowledge—suggested this charge. Moreover, if they had, that would have been in tension with their endorsement of transparency for disgust. If the real-life disgusting cannot but disgust in art as well, then how can it be "no longer actually disgusting" in the latter?[35]

However, there is a claim that some of them did make and that may be seen in the vicinity of the charge at issue. This is similar enough to Korsmeyer's second additional charge to suggest that perhaps she may be the victim of a confusion on this issue.[36] In its maturest form, the claim at issue can be found

[34] Korsmeyer [2011], 47.

[35] Not only does Korsmeyer not appreciate this tension, but she actually claims that transparency *entails* the charge in hand: "The artwork is not a filter through which the disgusting thing can be rendered differently from the way it would naturally appear—unless it is rendered not as disgusting but as grotesque or ugly. Hence the third count against disgust [i.e. that positive art appreciation is no longer of disgusting art] follows from the second [i.e. transparency]: when objects that would be disgusting in nature are *successfully* rendered in art, they take on a different affective quality altogether..." (Korsmeyer [2011], 47; author's emphasis). I cannot think of any way to make this claim coherent with what Korsmeyer says elsewhere, nor with the eighteenth-century view.

[36] Cf. also Chapter 1.

in Lessing, although Burke says similar things. Lessing concedes that in some instances of artworks, though only in literature, disgust has a positive role to play. Nonetheless, when it does, it only plays a supporting role to the terrible or sublime, or to the ridiculous. Disgust may make something more terrible or more ridiculous, but does not afford its own peculiar brand of aesthetic effect.

Note that this view is different from (and, in a sense, weaker than) Korsmeyer's charge. In fact, on this view, disgust is still part of the appropriate aesthetic response; it just is not appreciated for its own sake. (The view is also clearly compatible with the transparency of disgust.) In other words, this is an integrationist view, but not of the conversionary type. Concerning a passage from Ovid, for instance, Lessing says:

> [w]ho can picture to himself the punishment of Marsyas, in Ovid, without a *feeling of disgust*? But who does not feel, at the same time, that the disgusting is in its proper place here? It makes the terrible horrible.[37]

The horrible, in fact, "is nothing more than the terrible which *has been made disgusting*".[38] The difference between the charge alleged by Korsmeyer and Lessing's claim has the following import. Whilst Korsmeyer's charge is a definitive indictment of disgust in art (though not against the real-life disgusting), Lessing's claim, less drastically, *minimizes* the role of disgust (and the disgusting) in art.[39]

[37] Lessing [1766/1962], 134; my emphasis.
[38] Lessing [1766/1962], 133; my emphasis.
[39] In fact, Lessing [1766/1962] does not explicitly present his view as an indictment of disgust, but puts his point as more of an acknowledgement of a feature of disgust and the disgusting in literature: "the poet can employ at least some disgusting features as an ingredient in producing the mixed sensations of the ridiculous and the terrible" (132). However, the general dialectic, as well as the tone of the relevant passages, support my characterization of his view.

The stronger charge against disgusting art outlined by Korsmeyer is easily rebutted. This can be done by using many of the instances of artworks considered in this chapter or in Chapter 4 (and indeed in various places in Korsmeyer's book). The weaker, subtler view that Lessing endorses is by contrast more difficult to prove false. In fact, I think that there is a good deal of truth in it. Lessing was onto something important about disgust in this respect. Several other emotions or affective states, amongst which pity, compassion, indignation, terror, and humour/hilarity (if you count the latter as affects), produce their own brand of aesthetic or artistic pleasure. By contrast, disgust by and large only plays a supporting role. This is supported by the foregoing discussion. Disgust's unmixed unpleasantness, its transparency, and its unconsciousness of purpose combine in the ways I have pointed out to produce this result.

In Chapter 5 I showed how the distinctive value of much horror can have disgusting elements that contribute to it. I have argued against Lessing's claim that the horrible is "nothing more the terrible which has been made disgusting". Furthermore, I have suggested that, in many cases, the role of disgust in horror is only loosely connected to the emotional reaction that is distinctive of horror. However, an integrationist account of the general kind suggested by Korsmeyer is the best account for some disgusting art, including perhaps cases of horror. The distinctive feature of such an account is, along the general lines suggested by Lessing (and Burke), that disgust plays a supporting role for aesthetic effects the roots of which are elsewhere. This account, I suggest, is the one that is often the most appropriate to the best disgusting art.

The main difference between my account and Korsmeyer's (particular) account of disgusting art lies in the cognitive content of disgust which drives

aesthetic appreciation. As I have argued, the meanings and ideas inherent in disgust that can contribute to the aesthetic value of disgusting art centre on disgustingness. As such, they are of a more limited range and aesthetic potential than the meanings inherently connected to emotions such as fear, anger or sadness. However, I suggest, the former can contribute to aesthetic value by supporting powerful aesthetic effects, such as those rooted in the latter negative emotions (e.g. fear, anger, sadness) as well as in positive responses (e.g. beauty). Disgust's supporting role in this sense will be part of an integrationist account. The connection between the meanings and the emotion will be sufficiently close to allow phenomenological aspects of disgust to colour or be an integral part of aesthetic appreciation. In what follows, I will show two examples in which disgust has a supporting role of this kind, as well as one instance that comes short of achieving the requisite close connection between meanings and emotion.

11. Before that, it is worth discussing one last solution to the paradox of negatively valuable art that has been advanced in the literature. This is a solution that resembles in important ways the account that I propose. It is worth considering it briefly in order, among other things, to highlight the similarities with my proposed account. Sometimes categorized as a co-existentialist, sometimes as an integrationist solution, the meta-response account is advanced by Susan Feagin [1983].[40] Feagin's landmark article is widely cited, but has never met wide endorsement. The recurrent reaction to Feagin's meta-response theory has been to grant it some role in art appreciation, although not a central or widespread role.[41] In fact, this reaction is not misplaced in Feagin's case.

[40] Levinson [1997] endorses a meta-response account for negatively emotional music.
[41] See for instance Smuts [2009]; cf. also Levinson [1997], who mentions it as only one of three sources of

She suggests that the pleasure or satisfaction that we get from attending to negatively emotional (or, one can generalize: valuable) art lies in our meta-response to it. Our first-order response is one of unpleasantness (or disvalue); but we also find pleasure (or value) in recognizing ourselves as having that first-order response. This is because we judge our first-order reaction to be the correct one to have in those circumstances. On this account, for example, a morally outraged reader of Manzoni's *History of the Column of Infamy* will be pleased to find herself outraged.

Put like this, the meta-response theory shows little promise. It is justifiably criticizable for the limited, even shallow type of appreciation that it can account for. Although sometimes our art appreciation is self-congratulatory in the way envisaged in Feagin's meta-response account, that is hardly the most important part of the story when it comes to appreciation of negatively emotional (or negatively valuable) art. Moreover, this kind of meta-response account makes little sense for some negative emotions, including disgust. Sure: anger, indignation, compassion (responding to, as Feagin persuasively, albeit rather repetitively, puts it: "villainy, treachery, injustice")[42] are emotions that one can congratulate oneself for having towards the right kinds of objects. Perhaps sadness might fit the bill, too. But what about fear or (physical) disgust? For some emotions, the already marginal appeal of the meta-response theory becomes even more marginal.

12. However, the idea of a meta-response as (at least) an ingredient in art appreciation has greater promise than the particular self-congratulatory kind of mechanism envisaged by Feagin. In fact, it has special appeal in the case

pleasure in negatively emotional music.

[42] Feagin [1983], 98.

of disgust. It enables an integrationist account that is appropriate to many of the best instances of disgusting art. I have argued that disgustingness and its associated ideas can be the only cognitive sources of disgusting art's aesthetic value narrowly construed. Recognition that an artwork's subject matter warrants a first-order response of disgust is key to any aesthetic value that that artwork might have (insofar as it is a piece of disgusting art). Where present, the relevant aesthetic value will build on this first-order response.

Contrary to what happens on Feagin's model, the second- or, more generally, *higher*-order response need neither be the only step after the first-order response, nor the final step, in aesthetic appreciation. In other words, there may be a complex mixture of ingredients in the resulting value. In disgusting art, in particular, recognition of first-order disgust will interact with, and support other emotions or responses. In the best cases (from the point of view of aesthetic appreciation narrowly construed), the resulting response will be one of aesthetic appreciation, with disgust and its phenomenological aspects as an *integral* part.

13. One kind of cases of disgusting art that fits a higher-order response account, but one in which disgust does *not* have a supporting role is comedy. I have discussed some relevant examples already in Chapter 4. In a higher-order/support response account, a first-order response of disgust supports another (co-occurring) aesthetic response. By contrast, in disgusting comedy (at least insofar as laughter is understood as a defence response), hilarity generally ensues as a (not pre-existing) reaction to first-order disgust. Disgust is unpleasant and disgusting things are often taboo or inappropriate topics of conversation. Their being described or mentioned in comedy often disturbs or embarrasses audiences. Laughter is a way in which their (first-order) distur-

bance or embarrassment is counteracted, and hopefully shaken off.

Of course, taboo topics do not necessarily warrant hilarity; context is a guide in this respect. According to a plausible theory, humour arises out of perceived incongruity. Liberal mention or display of best- or usually-hidden objects of disgust is incongruous (because inappropriate) in a public context such as a theatre or a cinema, or even in painting and literature.[43] Moreover, incongruity is often enhanced through rhetorical arrangements, such as discrepancy between, on the one hand, an elevated, aulic context or language, and on the other a reference to base, disgusting objects.

Nonetheless, in most, if not all, disgusting comedy, disgust plays, only an integral part in a limited sense. It does so in the sense that disgust is an essential part of the valuable experience of hilarity. However, it seems inappropriate to say that disgust *merges* with hilarity to form an integral experience.[44] Insofar as hilarity works as a defence response, in fact, the disgust that one feels at first is, as it were, shoved away in leaving room for hilarity. In disgusting comedy, hilarity is in a sense a victory over disgust. If the latter lingered on, the former's victory would not be complete.[45]

14. Discussion of three examples will illustrate how a more integral, holistic aesthetic response works on the model of a higher-order response account, and one in which disgust plays a supporting role for other aesthetic effects. The first is not a success story. In her already mentioned chapter on hearts, Korsmeyer

[43] All of these are public contexts in the broad sense that they all involve communication with an audience, a public, whether actual or merely intended. In fact, the public in question need not be composed of more than one person at a time.

[44] Cf. Chapter 1 for Lessing [1766/1962]'s consonant views, especially his remark: "[t]he disgusting is capable of an even greater degree of *amalgamation* with the terrible [than with the ridiculous]" (133; my emphasis).

[45] Cf. Chapter 1 for a discussion of Karl Rosenkranz [1853/2004]'s consonant remarks on disgust and comedy.

discusses Episode 18 from the 6th season of the TV series *X-Files* [1993–2002]. The episode, entitled "Milagro", tells the (fictional) story of a young writer, Phillip Padgett, who appears to have the power to bring events into existence merely by writing stories about them. One of the stories that Padgett writes features an *alter ego* of himself as a Brazilian "psychic surgeon", i.e. a surgeon who has the supernatural power to extract human organs with his bare hands. Just as Padgett writes, the surgeon makes victims amongst US couples of lovers—by taking their hearts out with his hands.

Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, the two FBI detectives protagonists of the TV series, investigate these murders. As it turns out, the writer has a romantic passion for Agent Scully, who in fact features prominently in the psychic-surgeon story that he is writing. Driven by the avowedly ineluctable path of his imagination, he ends the story he is writing with Scully's death. In the entaglement between his writing and reality, however, Padgett, immediately after finishing to write, attempts to save the object of his romantic feelings from the consequences of his act. He first throws his manuscript into the fire, and then sacrifices his life by taking his own heart out of his chest. The episode ends with the image of the writer holding his heart in one of his hands, in the aftermath of his extreme sacrifice.

Korsmeyer focuses her attention on the opening and closing scenes of the episode. In both scenes, Padgett is seen holding his own heart in one of his hands. However, Korsmeyer suggests, the same image "takes on a stunningly different aesthetic character" in each scene.[46] In her opinion, the difference is attributed mainly to the development of the story recounted by the episode.

[46] Korsmeyer [2011], 152.

In the first scene, in a sort of anticipation of what will happen at the end of the episode, the writer takes his own heart out of his chest with his bare hands. The viewer knows practically nothing about him and his predicament (in the scene it is not even completely clear that he is a writer). By contrast, the final scene, in which the writer holds his heart after taking it out, finds the viewer informed about the entire story and associates the heart with the writer and with Scully's vicissitudes. Here is how Korsmeyer puts it:

> The heart at the very end *looks* identical to the first one, in the sense that it is visually similar: moist, bloody, pulsing. But in the space of less than an hour it has become far more than disgusting. It is raw and vulnerable, and there is a tenderness and courage surrounding it that induces the audience not to turn away this time but to linger over its sight, pondering and even savoring it.[47]

However, Korsmeyer sees too much in the use of the heart in this *X-Files* episode. There certainly are additional symbolic meanings associated with the heart in the last scene, as compared to the first. Nonetheless, the connection between the heart's aesthetic appearance and these meanings is not sufficiently close to generate the very different aesthetic experience that Korsmeyer hypothesizes. Firstly, the character of Padgett as the story presents it does not warrant a great amount of moral respect and admiration. Even after sacrificing himself for his beloved Scully, Padgett remains a questionable character, who caused the death of many people and appeared not to be too much troubled by

[47] Korsmeyer [2011], 152; author's emphasis. Although here Korsmeyer talks of the viewer savouring the disgusting *object*, her view is actually, as I have pointed out already, that it is disgust itself that is savoured. In fact, even in the "Milagro" case, she points out that "the heart prompts that somatic spasm of strong aesthetic apprehension, though now it is disgust of a far more reflective and complicated flavor than is the initial encounter with the heart" (152).

this. His love for Scully is portrayed as more of a romantic obsession than as a selfless, respectable emotion of love. Moreover, the relevant kind of semantic association between the heart and features of Padgett's behaviour in the story (e.g. his courage in sacrifice, his romantic feelings for Scully)—even if mediated by traditional associations between the heart and certain human features such as love or courage—seems too weak and unsystematic to change the aesthetic apprehension of the last scene in an important way. Finally, disgustingness does not connect in any relevant and meaningful way to Padgett's behaviour or to other features of the story.

15. However, there are ways in which ideas associated with disgustingness are capable of making disgust an integral part of aesthetic appreciation, or of turning something from simply foul to something worthy of pleasurable absorption. Two (success) examples will show two such ways. The first one is discussed by Korsmeyer [2011], and will give me a chance to further illustrate the differences between my higher-order/support response account and Korsmeyer's account in terms of "meanings of human mortality". The example is from the First Tale of the Fourth Day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The tale (also the subject of an exquisitely delicate painting by William Hogarth)[48] recounts the fictional story of the violent deaths of Ghismonda, daughter of Tancredi, Prince of Salerno, and of her lover, Guiscardo.

[48] See *Sigismunda mourning over the heart of Guiscardo* [1759].

48. William Hogarth, *Sigismunda mourning over the heart of Guiscardo*, 1759

Ghismonda, a young widow, lives with her father Tancredi, who loves her with an intense but possessive love. After realizing that Tancredi will never allow her to marry again, Ghismonda starts a secret romantic relationship with a virtuous but humble servant of her family's, Guiscardo. Upon discovering the relationship between his daughter and a lowly servant, Prince Tancredi confronts Ghismonda and commands her to end what he judges as an inappropriate and scandalous relationship. Ghismonda defends Guiscardo's nobility of soul and refuses to part from him. Angered by her refusal, Tancredi has Guiscardo killed, and his heart cut out and presented to Ghismonda in a golden cup. Ghismonda receives her beloved's heart, and is heartbroken and horrified by her father's cruelty. She cries on Guiscardo's heart and repeatedly kisses it. Then, overcome by her grief, she pours poison in the cup that contains the heart, and drinks from the mixture composed of the poison, her tears and his blood. Finally, she waits for the poison to kill her, lying on her bed, with Guiscardo's heart placed on her chest.

Here again, Korsmeyer's account of the artistic value of Boccaccio's tale is cashed out in terms of "meanings of human mortality". According to this

account, the tale affords its readers a grasp of the "inescapable, dolorous frailty of material existence",[49] as well as of "the depth of Ghismonda's love and her terrible loss".[50] As it is a "visceral" emotion such as disgust to afford such ideas, this grasp is "direct and somatic", and hence more intense and rewarding than if it were conceptually or propositionally conveyed.[51]

However, as I have already argued, an account of this kind is not satisfactory. Disgust is not cognitively rich in the right sort of way for it to be able to afford an emotional grasp of the kinds of meanings to which Korsmeyer appeals. However, I do agree with Korsmeyer that Boccaccio's tale employs disgust to valuable artistic ends. My own account of the relevant aesthetic value views it as supporting the value generated by other, more aesthetically apt (negative) emotions. In my view, the main negative emotions that pertain to the Boccaccio tale are compassion and indignation. Compassion is an eminently appropriate emotion to feel at Ghismonda's fate.[52] Similarly, indignation is certainly an appropriate response to Prince Tancredi's blind rage and cruel behaviour towards Guiscardo and Ghismonda.

Both compassion and indignation are suitable ingredients of aesthetic value. Many an artwork, including many of the classics, especially of narrative art forms and genres, offer appropriate objects of compassion and indignation. How can aesthetic value stem from these emotions? This is in itself the subject

[49] Korsmeyer [2011], 158.
[50] Korsmeyer [2011], 156.
[51] Korsmeyer [2011], 156.
[52] I classify compassion among the negative emotions, even though this move can certainly be questioned. As I understand it, and as its name suggests, compassion is essentially a "feeling with", a mimicking, or empathetic reaction to others' suffering. Although certainly less unpleasant than the reaction one would have to one's own suffering, a reaction of compassion is therefore bound to be unpleasant. Cf. Spinoza [1677/1985], Part III, Def. XVIII, for a similar understanding of pity. However, this classification does not make a difference to my main contentions. The affects and aesthetic effects that disgust supports will be sometimes positive, sometimes negative, and sometimes (if one is not committed to a rigid classification of emotions into either positive or negative) more mixed; cf. later mention of the role of tenderness in the Ghismonda tale.

of its own particular paradox of negatively valuable art. This is a paradox that I am not primarily concerned with solving here: my focus is disgust instead. However, the account of disgusting art that I advance here is importantly related to an account of compassion- and indignation-worthy art. In the case of Boccaccio's tale, my contention is that the aesthetic value of disgust lies in its strengthening the value that compassion and indignation produce. The former value is in this sense in a relationship of support with the latter. Since aesthetic value for both compassion and indignation is related in this way to aesthetic value for disgust, I need to sketch an account for the former two emotions as well. This account will only be summarily sketched, given my focus on disgust.

The compassion- and indignation-worthy material in Boccaccio's tale has value because it touches upon certain important human concerns. These concerns centre on such issues as human cruelty, love, and our precarious place in society. Moreover, they are embedded in a complex and wide web of beliefs, desires and imaginings. This is possible because of the cognitive contents of both compassion and indignation. In fact, compassion is the emotion that is appropriate to the witnessing of someone's suffering, often accompanied by a desire to help them. Indignation is instead a variant of anger, appropriate to the thwarting, in morally objectionable ways, of someone's desires or expectations. A story such as Ghismonda's in Boccaccio's tale has value because it describes and interacts with, in memorable and intriguing ways, some of these concerns and the web of cognitions in which they are embedded.

In fact, this account of the aesthetic value of compassion and indignation in Boccaccio's tale is a version of the account that Korsmeyer suggests for disgust—although the account is not of as much merit when applied to disgust. The capacity to capture certain ideas and concerns of ours is in fact one of the

earliest and most widely recognized virtues of art (and of art that deals with the unpleasant or the negatively valuable).[53]

So a very plausible, tried-and-true account of the value of art is not such a plausible account when it is applied to (the best) disgusting art. Instead, the account that I suggest as the most plausible in many of the best instances of disgusting art is the higher-order/support response account. Disgust's contribution to the value of the Boccaccio tale is best accounted for in this way. The disgustingness of Guiscardo's heart, as it is handled by Ghismonda in its golden cup, contributes by enhancing the feelings of compassion at her fate and indignation at Tancredi's cruelty. Disgust enhances compassion and indignation by enhancing the awfulness of Ghismonda's fate, who finds herself in the non-enviable predicament of being presented with a body part that (we, more or less consciously, imagine) she will find rather disgusting.[54] Also telling is Ghismonda's being so close to the heart that once belonged to Guiscardo, by kissing it, placing it on herself, drinking some of its blood etc. Once again, the disgust here enhances compassion and indignation, by making us appreciate how much Guiscardo was loved by Ghismonda and how heartbroken she is. Only immense grief can plausibly explain her overcoming the disgust that she must (at least at first) have felt.

[53] Cf. Summers [1990] and earlier in this chapter. Of course, in many instances, emotions different from disgust, including compassion and indignation, may also have a supporting role and/or work on a higher-order response model. The difference between such emotions and disgust, however, is that the latter is characteristically restricted to a higher-order/support response model.

[54] Someone in Ghismonda's predicament might actually be thought not to find the heart-in-a-cup disgusting. For one thing, she just may be one of the few people (a feral child perhaps?) who are not disgusted by raw, out-of-the-body human hearts. Alternatively, one might think that Ghismonda's affection for Guiscardo blinds her to the disgust that she would otherwise feel. The first conjecture is hardly worth any discussion, since (1) it suggests a very unlikely occurrence and, more to the point, (2) nothing in Boccaccio's tale suggests anything like it. The second is a more serious conjecture. What that heart is and what it represents for Ghismonda is certainly something that changes her (overall) attitude to it. However, given the way that disgust works, it seems unlikely that such changes would happen in Ghismonda immediately, and that she would not feel even only some *initial* disgust for the heart. Cf. also Chapter 2 and earlier on in this chapter.

So disgustingness contributes to enhancing compassion and indignation at Ghismonda's story. Moreover, the disgusting heart also becomes to some extent an object of tenderness (mostly a positive, or pleasant emotion), as well as of disgust. In fact, this tenderness is, in a sense, mixed with disgust. To an extent, the reader of Ghismonda's tale feels inclined to do as the heroine does, and kiss Guiscardo's heart, overcoming their initial disgust. Here, too, disgust only plays a supporting role to more aesthetically apt emotions. This is a further consequence of the disgusting heart becoming connected to ideas and feelings of compassion and also, to some extent, of indignation. However, disgustingness makes the tenderness with which one apprehends disgust more intense, as well as coloured with disgust's distinctive phenomenology. It does the former, insofar as tenderness for something disgusting is unusual and appropriate to dramatic circumstances.[55] This is therefore a further sense in which disgustingness supports higher-order responses by enhancing them, and with the final result of making aesthetic appreciation more intense than it would be otherwise.

In the ways just described, then, disgust enhances other, more aesthetically apt affects, among which compassion, indignation and tenderness, that are appropriate to feel at Ghismonda's story. It thus indirectly contributes to the overall aesthetic value of Boccaccio's tale. As suggested, the mechanism at work has the following two salient features:

(1) it works on a *higher-order response* model. The first-order response is disgust: the reader's own (at least in the form of a recognition that a disgust response would be appropriate for them) and Ghismonda's (at least as a recog-

[55] This phenomenon is in fact consonant with Hume's tragic conversion as I interpret it in Chapter 5.

nition that a disgust response would be appropriate for her). The relevant second- or higher-order responses are compassion, indignation and tenderness (or an increase thereof), and they are reached through recognition of the first-order response of disgust;

(2) in an important sense, disgust *supports* the affects of compassion, indignation and tenderness. It does so by enhancing these other more aesthetically apt emotional responses, and thus contributing to aesthetic value.

Disgust's supporting role for more aesthetically apt responses is further confirmed by two other of disgust's peculiarities. One is disgust's unmixed unpleasantness. Negative emotions such as compassion and indignation, as well as the often-pleasurable affect of tenderness, typically and *ceteris paribus* afford greater *physiological* pleasure than disgust.[56] Secondly, disgust's peculiar ease and passivity of elicitation make it a more difficult emotion to combine with physiological pleasure and aesthetic value narrowly construed, than are responses such as compassion, indignation or tenderness. The latter are more importantly attenuated by the absence or fictionality that is characteristic of the scenarios involved in most artworks.[57]

16. A final example will illustrate another way in which the higher-order/support response account works. *The Wounded Man* [1919] is one of the most powerful of Gert Wollheim's works, and certainly his best-known. It dates from the immediate aftermath of the Great War, although it is probably based on sketches made by Wollheim during his years as a soldier in the War.[58] The painting

[56] Cf. Chapter 5's discussion of Morreall [1985] for indignation (a variant of anger). Compassion is perhaps not a clear-cut *negative* emotion.

[57] Whether or not Ghismonda's story is based on reality or not, it is certainly far from the personal, immediate concerns of the vast majority of readers, and it is not present before them anyway.

[58] Here and in what follows I am indebted to the following sources for factual details on the painting's history: Vallen [online], and Crockett [1999], 84ff.

quite explicitly deals with the horrors of the Great War. Saliently, it portrays a man whose arms and legs are stretched in a pose of intense suffering. The man has a large and bloody wound on his stomach (Wollheim himself was shot in the stomach during the War, with near-fatal consequences) and blood on the palms of his hands.

49. Gert Wollheim, *The Wounded Man*, 1919

Wollheim's masterpiece is a memorable symbolic representation of the suffering that the Great War caused to tens of millions of women and men in Europe and elsewhere. As such, it makes sense that blood is an important part of the painting: it makes the depiction of war's atrocities more striking and convincing, almost shocking, and the painting more expressive as a result. Partly as a result of this, the work warrants compassion, sadness, even horror in a sense, as well as providing a source of reflection on the value of war. These emotional and cognitive responses to the painting are certainly sources of artistic value for the viewer.

However, the greatest purely *aesthetic* achievement of Wollheim's painting lies in the striking and memorable figure of the wounded man. This is a perfectly balanced, although almost disjointed figure of a man, whose body's very centre has been hit. The contrast between the bright red of the man's wound and the gloomy greyness of the rest of his figure also contributes to making *The Wounded Man* a remarkable and iconic picture.[59] Furthermore, the figure's extended arms and legs, and the contracting muscles all over its body and face, all economically and effectively express the man's suffering.

Overall, the disgustingness of the large, obvious wound on the man's stomach, as well as of the blood on his hands, adds to this aesthetic achievement. The painting is certainly not a pretty sight; it is in fact somewhat unpleasant to look at. However, the aesthetic interest produced by it is enhanced by consideration of the unlikelihood and strikingness of a disgusting scene that is also so aesthetically rewarding. Things that disgust are inherently non-appealing.[60] The artistic achievement of *The Wounded Man* is thus out of the ordinary and for this very reason greater than it would be *sans* the disgusting. Much as with Ghismonda's tale, in this case, too, the first-order response of disgust leads to a higher-order response of increased appreciation for Wollheim's artistic achieve-

[59] It is perhaps interesting to note how certain features of the material history of the painting add to its figurative power. The painting was originally the central panel of a triptych. The other two panels portrayed a soldier dead and one dying. Since painting materials were scarce in the Germany of the immediate aftermath of World War I, Wollheim painted *The Wounded Man* on two slabs of wood put together. The line where the two pieces of wood were joined is still very visible, and it cuts horizontally more or less at the level of the man's wound! The painting was separated from the two accompanying wing panels at the expenses of the owner of a prestigious modern art gallery, who was interested in exhibiting it. Upon seeing it, however, the owner changed his mind and refused to show it (presumably due to its difficult subject matter and forceful rendering). Even afterwards, Wollheim continued to have troubles placing it in exhibitions or selling it. The painting ended up being stored in the basement of the Düsseldorf Exhibition Hall. With Adolf Hitler's advent to power in 1933, Wollheim was included in the category of artists considered "degenerate" by the new Nazi regime, and some of his works were exhibited in the infamous 1937 Munich show on the "Degenerate Art". The two wings of the original triptych are believed to have been destroyed in 1945. *The Wounded Man* survives to this day. Cf. Vallen [online] and Crockett [1999].

[60] In many cases, this is likely due to their being disgusting. Cf. earlier in this chapter.

ment. In this latter case, disgust supports the pleasing aesthetic responses of balance and expressiveness of form.

17. In conclusion, as the abovementioned German-speaking eighteenth-century authors saw well, there are peculiar difficulties in solving the paradox of negatively valuable art in the case of disgust. In order to be part of a coherent and successful aesthetic experience, (1) disgust has not to be too intense. Because of its unmixed unpleasantness, disgust generally has to be kept below a lower threshold than other, more aesthetically apt negative emotions. (2) The unpleasant effects of disgust in art, when the work is representational, are attenuated to some extent by the absence or fictionality of real-life disgust elicitors. However, the margins for such attenuation of response (both with respect to the presence/representation and to the fiction/non-fiction dichotomies) tend to be importantly narrower for the disgusting than for the fearsome, anger-eliciting, sad etc. (3) Moreover, the ideas inherently associated with the disgusting are generally less varied and less aesthetically apt than those that we associate with objects involved in fearsome, anger-eliciting, sad etc. situations. These three peculiarities of disgust combine to make it a less artistically apt emotion than others. Nonetheless, disgusting art has in many cases positive value, and sometimes a very great one. In this sense, the best cases of disgusting art are often those in which disgust is part of a coherent aesthetic appreciation. This often happens when the disgust elicitor is also the object of another emotional or aesthetic response, one that has a greater aesthetic potential than disgust. In these cases, disgust plays a supporting role for the latter response, according to a higher-order response model.

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